# A Writer's Notes on his Trade

# A WRITER'S NOTES ON HIS TRADE

BY

C. E. MONTAGUE

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY

*H. M. Tomlinson*

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# *Prefatory Note*



For some time before his death my husband had it in mind to work out for publication a small volume to which in his book of jottings he gave the tentative title of *A Writer's Notes on his Trade*, and the following essays were written, in the intervals of other work, with a view to such a volume. But he had not started to arrange them in book form, and there would certainly have been additions and alterations. The essay "The Literary Play" is here reprinted, without the re-casting he planned, from Vol. II. of *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, published in 1911. Thanks are due to the English Association for permission to reprint this, and to Messrs. Chatto and Windus for permission to reprint "A Living Language" from their *Miscellany* 1928.

M. MONTAGUE

Burford, 1929

*C. E. Montague*

# C. E. MONTAGUE

After the war, I saw Montague but once. He sat next to me at a London dinner where some men out of France reunited for one night only; and every time the chairman, who was on the other side of Montague, rose to announce the next item of fun, he toppled over his glass of wine. The first time that happened Montague got it in the lap. He was very patient about it; he did not worry the chairman by ostentatiously wiping himself dry. The next time the chairman rose Montague quietly put his own chair one pace to the rear; and the wine went on the floor that time, and the next. Montague would not interfere with the way another man had with wine. He might have strict views of his own way with wine, but he regarded yours with silent and scarcely discernible interest.

Since the surprise of Montague's death—he appeared to be so hard and tough—there have been published a number of examinations of his character and his books. They have made good points, some of them, but they have not quite made C. E. M. He appeared to be hard and tough; but the last time I saw him I was struck by the way he had aged. We celebrated his fiftieth birthday in France, one night, and he stood up then to our attacks, looking young and lively except for his white hair, pleased that we were frank with our respect for him, but ironical with himself, probably to subdue his pleasure. He seemed

that night to be as good as the most junior officer present. The truth may be that he had a tender and even a sentimental heart, and that he hid it with that exterior he cherished of a man of action, logical and hard; but the war had seriously wounded his tender heart, and nobody knew it, not even himself; would a man who regarded a hair-shirt as more beneficial than silk admit that hardship and disenchantment had seriously hurt him? Could a man of action admit it, even to himself? Yet he may have known it; but you would never get Montague to confess that the consequence of what he had asked for was not within the strength of a man of courage to bear. Carry your pack till you drop; when you are tired, load it a bit more to show the superiority of will to matter!

I read *Disenchantment* through at a sitting. There was no doubt about its quality as prose. There was no doubt about the truth of it. It was the first real book given to England out of the experience of one of its sons in the war. It will remain where Montague placed it. It is indisputable testimony; it is indisputable, because Montague more than fulfilled the conditions which the implacable bigots set down as tests of patriotism in war-time: much over age, engaged in an "indispensable" industry, he left his family, dyed his hair, persuaded the recruiting officer that he was a game chicken, and went to the trenches in France. The strangest thing in it to some of us is that Montague was ever enchanted; if anything could prove his sentimental heart it is that. But he was enchanted—I mean he seems to have been—and let us be thankful, for otherwise there could have been no disenchantment, and so no testimony against war's abominable folly such as even the professional chewers

of glass cannot dispute. Montague was not a mere brigadier-general by favour who had many decorations, but who fought only with invoices and correspondence in an office: he enlisted as a Tommy; he sweated in the line. His position as a witness is therefore unassailable, let us wonder as we may over his initial enchantment. *C. E. Montague*

I knew Montague's writings well when I first met him, in a French château, where we had to live together, so naturally I regarded him with interest. He let me see he knew me, but that was all. He did not seek communion, and I did not offer it. He was a dutiful officer—that was plain enough—and some of my opinions about our common business were not fit for public exhibition. As I feared that Montague might agree with them, at least in part, clearly I could not distress an official who bore the Royal Arms. Whether he was grateful I do not know, but he was one of our censors, and he showed no hatred for the reading of my manuscripts; never said a word, nor erased a line. What I am sure about is that the talk at our table, at which we entertained strange guests, some of them important and some well known, must often have twinged the author of *Dramatic Values* and the one-time writer of leaders for the *Manchester Guardian*. Violence might be shown to Ireland, for example; and I have glanced at Montague then, to see how he took it. He would be looking at his plate and his mouth would be set. He could have demolished the confident fool with a word; but he said nothing. That hair-shirt! And Montague's dutiful appreciation of the embargo upon him by the Lion and Unicorn! He saw to it well; you were not going to get under his guard.

*C. E. Montague*

He had for so long controlled his emotions that his face knew perfectly what to do when he was moved; it did nothing. It only changed to mauve in cold weather. His eyes were onyxes, understanding and kind, therefore in spite of his stiff reticence and his soldierly bearing I never hesitated about confiding in him. We muttered half words together. He knew that I could and would say what I felt; but he also knew that I knew that he could not. He never sat by the fire with us after dinner. In the Arctic vastness of that saloon, he would go apart to a remote corner, sit bolt upright on a chair no comfort-loving man would ever choose, and read a newspaper sufficiently bleak and discordant. Whisky and all were at a side-table; if ever he went to that table I never saw him, though I was often there myself. You needed an anodyne in France, in those days, to make it endurable, but Montague did not, or if he did need it he was not going to have it; he would show his need who was master.

One morning in 1917 there was nothing to do. He surprised me after breakfast with an invitation to a long stiff walk to the town of Hesdin over the frozen country; that was a hard and memorable winter of the war, and that was a walk I shall not forget. Montague at last talked freely of men and books and the war, and we soon grew warm. We came to some chickens on the road. Montague stopped, still gossiping quietly, to throw some crumbs out of his pocket to them. We went on till we came to more chickens. He surprised me by producing more crumbs. Each time we came to chickens he found more brown crumbs in his tunic. It was gingerbread. But that stuff was not to be got in our house.

At last, with hens mobbing about us, I said to him, "Why do you do this?" Said Montague, "They like it." *C. E. Montague*

But don't suppose you always went out feeding chickens with Montague. He accompanied us, at times—as did the other censoring officers in turn—to the battle-zone. Captain Montague was then in charge. He used to enjoy those jaunts even more than giving gingerbread to hens. Our other press-officers were canny. They were soldiers, and to accompany us down to the certain mud and possible explosions was a sad duty of theirs, and they never pretended to enjoy it. In their hands you were as safe as one can be when nobody knows where the next shell will fall. But not so with Montague. He spurred the flagging spirit. Did the shells appear to be obdurate on that road ahead? Why, that was the road to our objective. We must take it, of course. No detour! One must keep to one's purpose on that line upon which one decided. The shelled road was only another lesson for the shrinking soul. The hairs in one's shirt are all on end this morning, and mighty hard? Good! Courage, brother, do not stumble!

No. I did not go down to the line with Montague if it could be avoided. I never did sufficiently value salutary experiences when there was a way round them. They are bad enough if there is no such way, and one has to face what cannot be dodged; so when the 5.9's were in flight, and the dirt was violently spreading, that was not the time to argue points of conscience and ethical distinctions with an Elizabethan character such as Montague. Consequently, when I had to make a visit to the line with him I had to face my companion somewhat in the way he faced

*C. E. Montague*

bursting metal; and if the experience did me good I had no use for its virtue. I am not at all sure that Montague himself really enjoyed it. He may have valued it because it was disagreeable and dangerous. After all, he was not in Tudor times; these were the days of disenchantment; and opportunities to prove to yourself that the human heart at core is still worthy were not to be despised. His eyes then would brighten at the testing and implacable outlook; the back-blasts of howitzers were like oxygen to him. In such dire and impersonal circumstances, in a really noisy barrage by heavy guns, there is no room for subtle mental doubts, no time for metaphysics and fine distinctions, no desire to speculate as to which of two good words is the preferable epithet; you come down plump to your chancy instincts. Metaphysician, can you manage your instincts?

One night H. W. Massingham arrived at our château, on a brief visit. He was the editor of the Radical *Nation*, a weekly political and literary review which fought nonsense with such knowledge and persistence that for a time the Authorities declined to allow the soldiers to read it. Montague was a Radical. Probably the opinions of both of them about war approximated; they approached each other, at that time, even over that particular war. I am sure Massingham was not able to guess that. Montague made no sign. The next morning, early, the three of us set forth for Courcelette, on the Somme. It was bitterly cold, and Massingham, frail, and not then in the best of health, had had enough of it long before we reached the ruined town of Albert. This is not the place to do more than mention the fact that the battle-ground of the Somme was unattractive. I saw

Massingham's eyes full of horror as he glanced over the landscape, at the point where Montague judged we had better leave our car. A leg bone with the boot still on it was sticking out of some rubbish beside us. Montague was beginning to look cheerful. The day was grey and the wind north-east. Shells were falling into Devil's Wood, shells were falling on La Boisselle. Montague turned to our driver with instructions for him.

"We shall be back in about two hours. If they are shelling this road, don't come to us. We will come to you."

"Yessir."

Massingham overheard this item of local interest with deep curiosity. Had Montague but known it, he would have taken the driver aside and whispered it; but he really appeared to suppose that any man would value an opportunity such as now offered. On we went.

We came to what used to be the windmill, on the Pozières ridge. Nothing showed there but tumbled rubbish in the universal mud; but as we drew level with it four nine-inch howitzers and two six-inch naval guns went off together, and slightly lifted me from my feet. All in the work of such a day! But Massingham was not used to it, and he was visibly shaken. One would be, even without neuralgia, and he had some. Montague, however, was getting brighter and brighter. He had no eye for Massingham. His gaze ranged the horrid landscape for inspiriting signs that it might oblige us with a display of its common routine of eruption and disaster, for he desired to satisfy the interest of a brother Radical; therefore he never noticed that Massingham already

*C. E. Montague*

was more than confirmed in all he had ever thought of battle.

We passed an aeroplane which had crashed, and beyond that the track rose again to a ridge; and over the ridge was the enemy. Montague stopped, and inspected Massingham, who was in a blue-serge suit and dark overcoat. Montague spoke. "On the top there," he said, "the enemy will be able to see us. He mightn't waste shells on three soldiers, but if he saw a civilian he would guess an important visit was being made, and he might hand us a bouquet. We'd better go back to the battery and borrow a khaki overcoat for you, before we go on."

"But", expostulated Massingham, "I don't want to go on. I've seen all I want to see."

Montague's disappointment was manifest. He was just beginning to enjoy himself. Could Massingham ever again have such a chance as this to see how very bad the worst could be? Why waste such a day?

Then he got a brief chance, and Montague took me aside. What did I think? Would it do any good to take Massingham on?

I met his look stoutly. No. Evidently, if we were to be shelled there and then, Massingham could learn no more. (I also wanted to go home.) The farther we went the more it would be the same. Reluctantly, as though he were leaving a good thing behind him, Montague about turned, and the light went out of his face. Massingham, with his back turned to the ghastly skyline, cheered up, though he did not know there were signs at our feet that that track had been heavily shelled not long before our arrival, and that an awful fiend might close behind us tread all the way back.

An appraisal of C. E. Montague is far from easy.

As you read these essays, which are of literature, it will help you to remember that he had attributes which in some of us would be contradictory and inexplicable. He could deride, with exquisite irony, the system of education which provides the English middle class with its monopoly of the Church, the Army and Navy, and the best things in the Civil Service; he knew, and it is indicated in his work, how closely this privilege, which comes mainly of birth and money, was related to all that brought him to disenchantment in the war; yet when Montague tells us of Oxford, there will steal an honest tremor into his words very like that which affects other writers when they dwell on the Scotch Kailyard. But that, after all, may only mean that Montague in his affections was unreasonable; and which of us is not? His work, because of its fine irony, is but apparently of the head; he did not trust the head; he was moved by the impulses of the heart, however they might traverse his reason. He gave himself to caprice, and so could make great play with words. Yet caprice never got him so far from home but that he could get back quickly, when matters were serious, and fight, as he did in *Disenchantment*, with all the weapons which cool reason can put to the hand of a man whose passion had been moved by grievous misdoings.

*C. E. Montague*

H. M. Tomlinson

*Words, words, words*

# WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

## I

In youth you easily fall in love with words, written and spoken. You come, like other lovers, to feel an unreasoned sensuous thrill of joy at a word because it is just what it is—the sound of it and the look of it on a page—as a child's mind thrills at the touch of fur because it is sleek and at that of a file because it is not. Apart from the interest of their use in any particular place, such words as "burnish", "crozier", "lustre", "beatitude", "dawn" become enamouring objects, with glowing hearts of their own, like red wine or rubies.

A sculptor alone in his studio will fondly stroke a lump of unworked marble or bronze; he can doat on its qualities. A writer or a good reader will do much the same: his mind will finger single words and caress them, adoring the mellow fullness or granular hardness of their several sounds, the balance, undulation or trailing fall of their syllables, or the core of sunlike splendour in the broad, warm, central vowel of such a word as "auroral". Each word's evocative value or virtue, its individual power of touching springs in the mind and of initiating visions, becomes a treasure to revel in.

Besides this hold on affection a word may well have about it the glamorous prestige of high adventures in great company. Think of all that the plain word "dust" calls to mind. "Then shall the dust return to

*Words, words, words* the earth as it was." "Dust hath closed Helen's eye." "All follow this and come to dust." "The way to dusty death." So, to the lover of words, each word may be not a precious stone only, but one that has shone on Solomon's temple or in Cleopatra's hair. Out of these illustrious atoms all the freakish pinnacles and cupolas of the world's wit were made, all the glow and intensity of its eloquence and the sweet poignancy of songs. All things in literature are born of them; into them all things will die, but the words themselves will remain, like the gases and salts into which we go back at our deaths; and each word is like some small parcel of earth that was once Caesar's brain and may yet make the brain of the next Christ that comes. Storied and ancient, it still has the freshness of youth; it lies, shiningly new, at the hand of every boy or girl who opens eager eyes upon life; it is as ready to enter into new melodies now as the single notes that were marshalled by Bach.

Thus, and with no qualification to his ecstasy, meditates the young, the unwedded wooer of words.

2

The happiest of wedded lives is a different thing from a wooing. It is a better state. But it is also a more open-eyed state. In it there may come a sense, not felt before, that married happiness is a thing to be kept only on certain conditions. The terms of the lease are not harsh; still, it is not fee-simple. To anyone who espouses the art of letters, and treats his bride fairly, there comes a somewhat similar recognition. He who weds words is tied, like the husband of the fairest lady, to one who has to carry about her

many other properties of earth besides the power, which he had already noted, of growing roses and lilies on her surface.

*Words, words, words*

Like the sculptor, who never can fashion a hair or a thread in marble, the writer finds himself pulled up at many points by the nature of his material. Words, like marble, have their own chilling form of rigidity. Inspire and prompt as it may, in practice the beloved material is always imposing upon its lover some limitation or other, and there is no sentence in which a writer burning to charge his utterance with its utmost fill of significance does not feel that some words, at least, are mere structural necessities, not signal rockets but only the dead-weight sticks that must attend them. The harder a writer tries to add beauty to clearness, the more surely does he feel himself to be held off from perfection by attributes of language which he did not make and cannot do away with; words that otherwise come near to expressing fully his personal sense of some enchanting thing may be found to hiss with sibilant letters, or scrunch and jolt with grinding lumps of harsh consonants, or dribble off into weak trickles of unaccented syllables. At every turn he is faced with a demand for compromise; either the sensuous rightness of rhythm may have to forego a part of its dues, or the more austere beauty of precision and coherence must be marred. At moments the true wedded lover almost craves for a larger liberty— Oh for some yet undiscovered mode of notation! Why should not mind be able to pass on to mind its thrilled sense of a storm or a flower without having to knead up the air and fire of the delighted spirit with the earth of a current vocabulary?

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So, in certain moods, the writer who loves words most truly may come near to thinking of them as "matter", the accursed thing, the ever-present incubus which obstructs and disables. Wooden, lumpish, perverse, they seem to head him off from the goal; they keep his work from being all that it seems as if it might be. Like "the flesh" or "the world", in the Biblical contrasts between these things and grace, they are that in which the divine agency of his art is destined to labour and which it has to transfigure or to redeem, but which never ceases to stand out frowardly for its own graceless ways. Objects, to him, of intense affection and of unquenchable hope, as the world was to Christ, words are the enemy too, the careless, unfeeling brute mass that will not respond: they may even crucify those who, like Flaubert, try the hardest to deliver them from their common poorness of significance.

3

In yet another light a writer may view the dear enemies, as old lovers in books used to say, of his repose. In words themselves he may see a kind of internal conflict. You can fancy the marble "David" of Michelangelo as existing before it was actually carved. Immured like some fossilised shell in the marble surrounding it, there it was, every grain of it, only awaiting release from the oppression of that encumbering bulk of gross matter. And yet the statue itself was matter as well as the rest of the block, and so it is now. It was, till liberated, a piece of matter kept out of its rights, debarred from being all that it had it in itself to be. When the sculptor had dis-

engaged it from its prison, it was the same piece of matter that had lain "in cold obstruction" in the dark midst of a formless rock. Yet something momentous had befallen it. It had been charged with immediate power to stir mind and heart. It had attained so choice a measure of self-completion that, as long as it lasts, it will be as wonderfully different from any rough block of similar stone as Michelangelo himself was from a tall ape.

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Still, we should go too fast or too far if we were to write off as "mere matter" or as "waste matter" all the rest of the block from which a "David" has been extricated. Relatively to the "David", no doubt, it is waste matter. Relatively to something else it may be splendidly to the purpose. Every good-sized splinter of it must have held a fine statuette that some artist with the right power might have rescued from its particular dungeon. Relatively to some unachieved possibility of its own, every flake that is chipped off may be essential and organic. That it is so is the only safe working assumption; we may find least to abandon or to overhaul, as our thinking goes on, if we think now of all marble, all paint, all words, all the material in which any art works, as capable of transfiguration, as awaiting it, almost as attempting it and crying to artists for their help in this continual effort of self-emancipation, self-realisation.

What, then, becomes of that lover's quarrel between the writer and his material? And of the brothers' quarrel between the marble that is taken and that which is left? These piques seem to dwindle in presence of a more momentous war in which all these, or the souls of all these, fight as allies. The rescue of matter from being mere matter, of marble from being

*Words, words, words*

mere flaky lumps of the crust of the earth, of language from being a buzz of crude signals and rudimentary chatter and no more—this is the divine event that beckons to both sculptors and writers and, in a sense, to matter itself, and the contribution of matter to its own deliverance is its evolution of special qualities conducive to the end in view, the choice loveliness of the textures of stone, its fissile quality, its gift of weathering; the brilliant lustre depth and diversity of paint and the inherent comeliness and melody of words to eye and ear, apart from their meanings, in the obvious sense of meaning. They find these sinews of war while the artists fight for them and with them.

4

The common adversary is less easily definable than these aspiring forces that are leagued against him. He is formlessness—a kind of lumpish and sluggish recalcitrance, a hugger-mugger fecklessness always ready to possess the world and ourselves, an inveterate halfness afflicting, if it can, the glories of our birth and state.

A man who writes, at the top of his powers, from a full mind, is always longing to be shorter than he is. Why, he feels, should not these symbols that he has to use be cut free from their baggage of lengthiness and their cumbrous rules of construction? Why should a glowing sentence have to be dulled with such lack-lustre dust as all the "its" and "is" and "that" and "which" and "to" that clog it? When all is done that man can do, what a quantity of dull setting there has had to be for each gem that he has cut! At best, how much of matter to how little of form!

There is no coherent sentence in which you will not find, in some proportions or other, both matter and form. Even in a song of Shakespeare's there are some words which, you may say, contribute nothing directly to the intoxicant glory of the whole. They are not vines; only props in the vineyard. And even in the frisking of the cheap humorists there is a kind of form; the old words do, at least, go through a kind of poor weary dance, like the Frenchman's chained bear. What differs is the extent to which, in each case, matter has been taken up into form, merged in it and become inseparable from it.

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In the inarticulate exhaustiveness of an English dictionary you may see the huge range of living stone out of which have been quarried and modelled such treasures of art as

> the tide of pomp
> That beats upon the high shore of this world.

What has befallen those four common nouns, one common verb and one common adjective, dug out of the hill-side? First a triumphant survival, a retention of prestige, when each was tried, as it were, for its life, in the pitiless just court of a supreme artist seeking the perfect means to his end. One imagines Shakespeare writing the passage, perhaps, as long at first as one of his full-blown similes—King Richard's simile of the clock, or the Primate's of the bee-hive—and then asking himself, "Can I not by some ellipse, some crystallisation of the value of all these words into a few granules of gleaming suggestiveness, make the whole mass of significance flash out at once instead of slowly blinking and twinkling its way into clearness?" And then the

*Words, words, words* slaughter of a dozen lines and the reconcentration of all their sum of value on the twelve words left—to the mysterious enrichment of these, as if, like primitive man in his own imagination, they had taken into themselves the virtues of the rivals whom they had killed and devoured. Thus, at every step in the ascending scale of creative energy which brings such things to the birth, you see two interdependent processes at work. The thing which is coming to perfection is being drastically purged of words, more and more words, as if words were presumptively dross; and a diminishing residue of words are being impregnated and re-impregnated with a strange, super-normal glory and wonder of expressiveness and beauty.

Or is this enrichment not super-normal at all, but really normal, simply the release of the chosen words, for the moment, from an abnormal or subnormal dullness and plainness that afflict them at other times?

> She walks in beauty, like the night
> Of cloudless climes and starry skies.

All the words here are common enough; and one may feel either that kitchen coals have turned for a moment into diamonds, or else that a few diamonds have ceased for once to masquerade as kitchen coal. It all depends on what you take to be "par" in the scale of expressiveness—the faint significance of words like "ridge", "pine", "wild", "fledged", for a common dullard, or their evocative magic for a Keats, when writing of a wild ridge fledged with pine.

That, in turn, may depend on what you are inclined to think of the future of the race—whether mankind strikes you as resembling an adolescent,

only on the threshold of a glorious adult life, or as a rose that already is overblown. You may like to think of any word that has colour and form as of Stratford or Haworth in the Middle Ages, waiting obscurely for a Shakespeare or Brontë to make it illustrious, or as one of the physical elements of which a living body, of special beauty, is presently to be composed.

*Words, words, words*

## 5

One of the oldest of common antitheses is the one between the ideal and the thing that we have to put up with, an imaginable perfection and some moderate good which must serve. Nor is it a long step from thinking of something as distinguishable from the ideally good to thinking of it as bad. Hence the old friarly feuds against the common good things of life, the backing of spirit against flesh and of the Kingdom of God against this pleasant faulty world, and, in art, the setting of matter and form by the ears.

But, for all we can see, matter and form, like body and soul, are co-extensive and interdependent; each is a condition of the other's existence, and Shakespeare's art itself could no more decline to be yoked with that plodding Dobbin, the English speech that others had made before he arrived, than his spirit could go from Stratford to London without certain help from his legs. If form enables matter to rise to the highest achievable power of itself, matter is that in which, alone, form can find exercise for its own transfiguring faculty. In the most perfect picture or book there may be almost no mere matter left; but what has happened is not that matter, in the main,

*Words, words, words* has been expelled; rather, that no considerable margin of matter remains unanimated by form. There is scarcely any mere paint in the Sistine Madonna, but there is plenty of paint.

Obvious analogies can be found in the fields of religion and of morals. The faith of the man who, whether he eats or drinks or does anything else, does it all to the glory of God, is an own sister to the form which marshals and inspirits matter of all sorts into beauty and nobility. And when the devout speak of "the beauty of holiness", or men of science speak of a "beautiful" or an "elegant" demonstration of some physical fact or law, you may feel how far the workings of form, in the sense known to art, extend beyond the tender contentions of artists in letters, marble or paint with the beloved and exasperating materials that they have espoused.

# *A Living Language*

# A LIVING LANGUAGE

## I

The word *morale*, in italics, had a great vogue at the time of the War. The *morale* of the troops of each English-speaking country was splendid: everyone said so. Schoolboys took up the word; they discussed the *morale* of parents faced with the duty of giving tips. We have heard since of the sterling *morale* of strikers. This may mean either a staunch fidelity to law and order, or willingness to overturn a motor bus in the street at a word from the proper person. It depends on who is speaking.

In either sense the word soon began to bring down upon those who used it the contumely of linguists. Why, they asked, did we use a French word which did not, by a long chalk, mean the thing we were trying to say? Why not use the common French word, *moral*, which does mean that thing? Stung by this reproach, a part of the British press has been infected with scruples. It has reformed the gender and ranged itself with France. But journals of a tougher fibre have adhered with bull-dog tenacity to their original fancy. The happy issue of the controversy is that both *moral* and *morale* are now used in England almost indiscriminately. The efforts of the purists have been as richly blest as those of the town councils which recently adjured us, by public placard, to "keep to the left". They certainly succeeded in breaking down our ancient habit of keeping to the right so far

as to leave most of us halting between the two routes, much to the increase of amusing collisions.

But now comes me cranking in, as Hotspur says, another school of purists, the purists who swear by simple English practice and won't have it put out, and possibly polluted, by the attempts of pedants to revise it. Granted, we cribbed *morale* from the French. Granted, we inadvertently took the wrong word. Still, the thing is done now. Let bygones be bygones. *Morale* is ours, like Gibraltar or Malta. It has become a fine old English word—so the argument runs—and it is sheer Gallicism to try to bully us now into correcting a howler which is at least unspotted by any sort of academicism or of moral turpitude. So the argument runs on.

Certainly this doctrine has its comforts. Many of us, being good, easy-going souls, have a use for a statute of limitations that would bar any indictment of miserable sinners who have stuck to some old and cherished misuse of a common word. Consider the milliners and palmists of Great Britain. For as long as the mind of the living can reach back, these artists and wise women have been calling themselves "Mdlle." Smith and "Mdlle." Wright on the fronts of their shops, though the French nation is unanimous in rejecting this ingenious form. For some generations almost the whole of the British press clove to the heresy of those self-adopted daughters of France. Even in 1927 "Mdlle." Lenglen was a commoner term of reference to the lady of tempestuous temperament than the "Mlle" in which Frenchmen persist to the verge of bigotry.

Well, what about it? May the milliners spurn as a bullying Gallicist the precisian who carps at their

preferences in spelling? Have the palmists achieved correctness by sheer staying power, as rural footpaths are won for the public use by centuries of diligent trespassing? And if that which was wrong has now become right in these leading cases of "Mdlle." and "morale", has that which was right become wrong? Is "Mlle", when written on British soil, positive error? If so, then—"arising out of that answer", as Members of Parliament say—are Frenchmen right, too, in sticking to their ancient practice of writing "esq." with a small "e" in addressing letters to English friends? Is "Esq." actually wrong when it is written on the far side of the Channel?

Such thoughts, such seemingly lawless and uncertain thoughts, may make you shiver at first. They may seem to go too deep or point too far, like Professor Einstein's detection of a list in the very backbone of space: you may feel as if you were looking right over the edge of the good old world in which right and wrong were not volatile, nor a false quantity a mere detail of relativity. Still, "liberty's a glorious feast", as the Jolly Beggars in Burns sang when not thieving: the heart of any humane person must leap at the thought that the most headlong dropper of aitches may yet sit at the right hand of Dr. Murray or Dr. Bradley in Heaven when practitioners of the slave virtue of correct aspiration lie howling. Besides, anything is of use which helps to clear out of your mind the notion that a language is, or ought to be, a finished and immutable system in which certain words are indefeasibly high-castes and certain other words are doomed for ever to be untouchables.

*A Living Language*

We used to be told in our youth that every great language had a "prime", as a pear has—one golden prime and no more. Greek had a Periclean prime, Latin a Ciceronian prime, English an Elizabethan, or perhaps a Queen Anne, prime. If so, our fate now would be a poor one—to be born, like the less lucky May-flies, late on a dull afternoon, with no chance of feeling what life under a mid-day sun may be like. And if the career of the English language since Addison's time, or some earlier one, has all been a falling away, and can never be anything else, then no doubt the best we could do for it now would be to put off, as long as we could, each step of the predestined decay. Suppose a new word sought a home in the English language; our line would be simply to ask "Has any English classic used it?" And if the word had no great man of the past to speak up for it, then we should have to chase the poor thing away from the door.

But why tie ourselves down to thinking of a great tongue as a fruit that must first ripen and ripen and then rot and rot? It is as easy, and may be as wise, to think of it as a living breed—not a single life but a strain that may live for years without end. Such a breed may have good times and bad. But perhaps it may, like a single animal body, be unable to reach the top of its health unless there be waste and repair going on at a great pace in its tissues. The English language that Shakespeare was born to had used up and scrapped a good deal of the English of Chaucer, and it had taken in plenty of words and idioms that Chaucer had never heard of. What rich gains, too,

did the bigger Victorian writers make by their large drafts on the new-born terminologies of physical science, of German philosophy and of French criticism. If a language would live, it must eat. And the English language, in all its times of best health, has been a good feeder, if not a gross one. Nothing that it had a mind to has ever stuck in its throat, or failed to turn into good flesh-forming stuff in its gizzard. Look at the way it has browsed on all the technical jargons of sport, from hawking to golf, picking out every term or figure apt for literary use. And the way it set to, when the Great War came, and packed up every crumb of pithy idiom it could find in the new vocabulary which came of new methods of fighting, or on the lips of enemies or allies.

Of all this wholesome mixed diet the part that may well give us most joy is supplied by the genius of the British races for vivid new idiom. They never cease trying to piece together new phrases out of a few of the commonest verbs, prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns—"be", "do", "make", "run", "put", "in", "up", "down"—especially the all-expressing, all-connoting "it". "I ran for it", "We made it up", "We were hard put to it", "It was neither here nor there"—these and many of their like, taken down from the lips of the least bookish of men and women, have long been classed as good English.

Mr. Justice Shallow's cry of admiration, "You *can* do it, sir, you *can* do it!" is the most English of English, and therefore the best. So is his brother magistrate's answer of "Thereafter as they be" to an enquiry about the price of ewes at the fair. They rank with that treasure of idiomatic Englishness—

"The time has been, that, when the brains were out, the man would die, and there an end". But there is no eternally impassable line between these treasures and the more recent products of the forge that they were made in. "We did him down", "They all but did us in", "It's time we got down to it", "Up to you to do it", "We're up against it"—these turns of speech may as yet be called slang; but they have the old virtue in them; you see the old temperament of the race still evincing itself; still shying away from the long abstract word; still going back to a few simple elements and reaching the effect it wants by recombining them; still clinging, with a true instinct for style, to what is terse and elliptic and concrete and springs in your mind a clear, sensuous image.

It has been common to think of "the vulgar" as natural enemies to the purity and richness of a language. No doubt they do tend to efface some nice distinctions and to heap all the functions of many delightfully different words upon "bloody" and a few other grimy and fagged maids-of-all-work. But there is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon. People who are not well versed in letters, but are rubbed hard against life, are at least likely to be free from the habit of facile figuration which gives to so much "literary" writing an air of dull dressiness. But, given a natural liveliness of mind, an unlettered speaker may startle you with his power of giving to the spoken word an urgent aptness that approaches the vivid instancy of an involuntary cry. Arnold said that Wordsworth

> laid us as we lay at birth
> On the cool flowery lap of earth;

and quick-witted people who have not had a great many words brought into their reach will sometimes come out with a surprising gift for renewing the sturdy infancy of a language by putting it to the simplest uses with a relish and glee which make everything new when they touch it. Pedants are sure to turn out in force to impede this operation of grace or to insist that its fruits be thrown away. But a Shakespeare or Bunyan knows how to prize them. He uses them for his own ends. And everybody who loves the language enough to want to keep it always young and racy ought to turn out too and keep the pedants from running amuck.

## 3

It has been said, with quite pointed ineptitude, that America is a place where the English language loses much and has nothing to gain. Modern American slang is often quoted in support of this severe judgement. But a great deal of modern American slang is, in quite a sound sense, one of the most English things in the world. Even Australian slang is scarcely stamped more distinctly with the trade mark of the old racial workshop. A list of American slang words and phrases should gladden anyone who delights in the way Elizabethan English was made. "At the end of a mile Jim was all in"—is that worse, or better, English than "when a mile had been run Jim was in a state of exhaustion"? Which comes the nearer to the practice of those sterling masters of English prose idiom, Messrs. Shallow and Silence?

"I beat it to the door"—how much vigour and

colour that has, compared with "I hastily quitted the room" or "I retired precipitately"! And then "to get away with it"—applied to bringing off a scheme; to "put it over on him"—make a man accept an imposture; to "put it across", that is, to get a thing done in the face of obstacles—these are the best of good English idiom in every sense except that they have not yet been registered in the stud-book kept by the pundits and mandarins.

Of course it is not all American slang that can show such transparently English descent; too many European streams have poured a part of their spare water into the Hudson. Witness "weisenheimer"—colloquial term for a shrewd person; "Talkfest"—the "conversazione" of old; and "buttinsky"—an intrusive varlet. No British connoisseur of strong idiom will "fall for" these. To him they are "bum doodads". Nor would he "give a fat hoot" for any such freak of facetious lengthiness as "dolled up fit to kill" (gaily dressed) or "hand the cold boiled stare". Lengthiness is the death of good slang: he who errs that way is but "dressing up like a plush horse". But "boob", "grouch" and "galoot" are no mean pieces of minting; a "cheap skate" is surprisingly suggestive of a fellow of mean spirit; we gladly "hand it to" him who first declared that he "would take no one's dust" (let no one keep ahead of him); and, as a term of reprobation for fulsomeness on the "jackets", or dust-cloaks, of new books, "blurb" is a peach of the first order.

Perfect slang has a cunning brevity that braces you. It should taste sweet and keen, like a nut. If it does, it will make its way yet into that holy of holies where "literary" English lives in state. For this

queenly figure has the instinctive sagacity of every successful ruling caste. She does not build the wall round her fastness too high; and she makes good the natural losses of her establishment by opening a postern gate now and then and letting in the pick of the lusty upstarts of the period. No assemblage of academic duennas, however august, can put the kibosh upon her when she is thus prudently minded. "Me for it", she will say, and turn the key, and take "blurb" to her bosom.



## 4

Is it beyond hope that in this matter a quite respectable job may be found for those who ply the homely, slighted trade of the journalist? Not, of course, at the heart of the empire of letters, but somewhere out on the shady borderlands of its demesne, where language may often be corrupt and uncouth and yet commendably alive. These are the fields in which to trot a new word up and down like a horse that is for sale—to show its paces and bring out its points. Like the nimble groom who holds the halter and runs, the pressman can assist at the trial of an aspiring idiom. He can use it experimentally in his own fugitive pieces, for the more learned world to see how it looks. If you perish daily with your works you can risk doing things which could scarcely be expected from more durable practitioners.

Suppose that all the best English journals took to saying, with grave faces, that it was "up to" Ministers to do this or that, the journals might positively succeed in lugging and shoving that choice scrap of slang into a lawful seat in the inner circle of polite

English. So much the better. Suppose, again, that the candidate for admission were—dare I say?—"done down", or "done in", at the gate of the citadel. No one would be a penny the worse. A few trenchant persons might say: "It's only those drunken Helots, the papers, again. No one else would have imagined that such a solecism could pass." Any journalist could bear that. If you get a new skin every morning you can have plenty of mud thrown in your face, as well as touch plenty of pitch, without any chronic or highly painful sense of defilement. Believe one who has tried.

*Quotation*

# QUOTATION

I

Do you know how it feels to enter a first-class hotel with no luggage but a rucksack? I do. The noblemen disguised as hall porters look through or past you. The princess in control of the bureau listens with a vinegar aspect to your petition for shelter and assigns you the least covetable of rooms. The infant Bacchus, in plum-coloured Eton jacket, who shows you the way to your sorry chamber, handles your jejune baggage with an air at once of disdain and of apprehension, as though it might either fall to pieces or bite him. You come down to dinner cowering under a sense that your infamous reputation has preceded you. The ex-ambassador who has accepted the portfolio of head waiter shows a true diplomatist's sense of relative values by giving you that penal seat which is islanded in the very estuary of the passage issuing from the kitchen, so that your elbows, and nobody else's, may be polished by frequent friction against the hips of his lieutenants as they hasten back and forth between the destinations of the evening's victuals and their place of origin.

That is how some of us feel all our days. For we are going up and down this well-read world with literary luggage so meagre that it is hardly worth putting up in the rack, not to speak of the van. Scarcely a day passes over our heads on which no eye of scorn has fallen on some detail or other of our

*Quotation* destitution. The talk turns to Southey or Landor, De Quincey or Peacock, Goethe or Schiller, Ariosto or Dante, Rabelais or Corneille, *The Faerie Queene* or *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Then it all comes out. Not one of them have we read. And then the lips of the tactful are almost imperceptibly closed, and those of the less tactful may be balefully opened. Perhaps someone addicted to a sort of slum research goes on to question us further, so as to find whether our ignorance is absolutely exhaustive. I have had my depths plumbed and dredged in this manner for traces of some acquaintance with Gibbon or with Roger Ascham, Stendhal or Balzac, Sir Edwin Arnold or Sir Thomas More. High and low the inquisitors have rummaged the pockets of my mind. Had I read *Urn Burial*? Did I know my *Hudibras*? The good men might have fished all night; they would have caught nothing in me. With none of those august authors had I so much as a nodding acquaintance. Darkest England surpassed herself in my poor person.

How, you may ask, does any adult come by such indigence? Why sit down under it in brutish contentment? In cases like mine it is not so much that we hate all written matter in the mass, like the spirited person in *Marmion* who thanked God that no son of his could read or write except one and *he* could not help it, as he was a Bishop. A West European must not be taken to hate all womankind because he has not become the husband of such a "simple coming-in of wives" as Solomon's. It may be that monogamy charms him; or at least that, if he be a polygamist in his heart, he puts a reasonable limit on the number of these visionary unions. Some

of us men of few books were wedded to our few so happily and so young that we have never felt much call to go out wandering over the crooked hills of literary love. *Quotation*

2

Most of us used to begin our relations with literature by chewing, positively chewing, folk fables and illustrated rhymes imprinted on stout calico. After that novitiate the firstlings of my tiny library were *Robinson Crusoe*, the Jarvis version of *Don Quixote* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It feels now as if my mind had set forth upon this earthly pilgrimage by train, with these three works and myself occupying the four corners of a compartment otherwise empty. We four were leagued together by a tacit treaty against anyone else who might want to get in.

There's no denying that, at more than one station, on the journey which has continued since, a new book has got in. Sourly eyed for a while, it has then by insensible degrees been taken into the league against any further entrants. I can remember still the helpless warming of the heart towards the *Imitation of Christ*, and the lyrics of Herrick and Burns, the essays of Bacon and Lamb, Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, the *Compleat Angler*, Pepys, the *Aeneid*, Hugo's *Quatre-Vingt-Treize* and the *Holy Living* of Jeremy Taylor, and then the jubilant and unconditional capitulation to all Shakespeare, the Falstaff parts first.

By this time the compartment was full, and one or two passengers standing. So there it ended and there the company has remained, so far as it can be said

*Quotation* that any book has really been a man's travelling companion through life. I have certainly talked, as it were, through the open window at wayside stations to some other notable figures in literature; and everyone is aware, anyhow, of a good deal of the Bible, so large a percentage of it is floating about in the atmosphere. Also one has to consort, in a way, with a certain number of books which, as Lamb said, are not really books but things in book's clothing—works of reference and information, inanimate histories, geographies, encyclopaedias—just as one has to converse, more or less, with tax collectors, magistrates and other principalities and powers whom one does not actually grapple to one's soul with hooks of steel. What I mean by reading is not skimming, not being able to say as the world saith, "Oh! yes, I've read that", but reading again and again, in all sorts of moods, with an increase of delight every time, till the thing read has become a part of your system and goes forth along with you to meet with any new experience you may have.

If you want to share the joys of the intensive reader you must almost abandon the hope of being a really extensive reader too. "A few children of the gods have done it," as the Cumaean Sibyl said of going to Hell and coming back safe, but most of us are merely human on both sides, and life is short. Bacon says that charity will scarcely water the ground if it must first fill a pool; and if you should have a true intimacy to maintain with a dozen supremely beloved authors, you will hardly be able to work up also the amazingly wide acquaintance which many people seem to have with the whole field of letters. So you may take a very small holding on the slopes

of Parnassus, or you may get shooting rights over the whole of the mountain. But there is no getting both. And, if you go for the freehold, you must be prepared for the whips and scorns that await the man of few books at the hands of those who can talk about many. Yet is there a refuge awaiting you too. It is easier to write pretty well than to talk up to the level of any society that affects "the things of the mind". You can turn author yourself. You can go ply the homely, slighted shepherd's trade. *Quotation*

3

You will observe that a classic quotation has just come into my head to help me in curling the tail of a paragraph. That is where we men of slight reading come in. If you read in the Polonian spirit, not dulling your palm with entertainment of each new-hatched, unfledged commodity of Mr. Mudie's and Mr. Boot's, but reading an old book again when a new one comes out, you will find that the whole of what you have read is comfortably within reach of your hand whenever it is wanted for a professional purpose. All of it is like that relatively small part of a bank's assets which figures on the balance-sheet as "in hand or at call", whereas the accumulations of most of your widely read men seem to be somewhat deeply and remotely invested. No doubt their resources are well employed, in a sense, as Antonio's were when he had one argosy upon the high seas, bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies and a third at Mexico. But as soon as the cry was for cash, Antonio was hammered upon the Rialto. So you will often see men with the learning of an Acton or a

*Quotation* Bryce gravelled for lack of a ready quotation at a pinch when some fellow who never had any learning to speak of will pop out the one perfect thing as surely as if he enjoyed plenary inspiration.

Is it too much to say that the wit of your most voluminous readers is prone to move slowly? That it is somehow weighed down with the thews, the stature, bulk and big assemblance of their acquisitions? I once heard J. A. Froude and Andrew Lang talking at dinner. Froude, I fancy, knew ten times as much as did Lang. But whatever Lang knew was all there. He kept it mobilised the whole time. He could bring it to bear in an instant, while most of Froude's forces were like the Russian rural reservists who had first to walk for a week to the nearest railway station when mobilisation was ordered. Oh, give me always, as Falstaff advises, "a little, lean, . . . bald shot", that will about and about, and come you in and come you in vivaciously, rather than one of those Samsons or Sandows of learning. I mean, of course, for human nature's daily use in the more lightsome walks of literature and her agreeable arbours. No blaspheming of divine Knowledge is intended, except in the minor article of her not always stirring her stumps as much as she might.

But might she? Or is there some vexatious little law, in the scientific sense of the word, that your reading shall be available in inverse proportion to its width? Certainly if you know as few books as I do, and like them as much, you will find that they stand by you surprisingly well. Often they will strike in spontaneously to your aid when, without a seasonable "quote", you might pass for a dumb dog in

the day of trial. Few novelists are less bookish than Kipling, and few have ever brought off a more triumphant quotation than his use of "I am dying, Egypt", in his *Love o' Women*. Cherish a few books only, and those few chosen not for their fame in the world but wholly for the pleasure that they give you—"In brief, sir, study what you most affect", as the sensible Tranio says in the play—and you may find they will remain such shining marvels in your sight that relevant scraps of them will recur to you spontaneously under any sort of stimulus. *Quotation*

That, you can soon see, is how Lamb had read the Bible, and Scott had read Shakespeare—for delight. Quite early in the history of medicine the doctors found out that a man could digest his food best if he ate it with pleasure among cheerful friends. So is it with books. You may devour them by the thousand, swiftly and grimly, and yet remain the lean soul that you were. The only mental food that will turn to new tissue within you, and build itself into your mind, is that which you eat with a good surge of joy and surprise that anything so exciting should ever have been written. When Scott's witty or tragic imagination was working at the top of its powers, more and more whiffs of Shakespeare would seem to visit his brain, to regale and incite it. For great writing, I fancy, must be a somewhat tempestuous business. When the winds of genius blow great guns I imagine that all of the gifted person's casual and cursory reading goes below, like other passengers. But the few are all the more with him the greater the stress becomes and the more completely he is stirred to the utmost use of his own gifts.

*Quotation*

"If a man", says Bacon, "read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth not." If he be a writer by trade, and if the little he reads be read in the spirit that Tranio enjoined, he need not be troubled by Bacon. Credit for ten times the reading he has will come of itself. That excellent critic, the late Mr. Walkley, was often spoken of as erudite, because his charming quotations gave so many readers a feeling of having to do with a man who had all literature at his command. But go through those quotations and see from how few books, in all, they are made—how many of them from one short treatise of Aristotle, how many from one novel of Dickens. Again, Thackeray seems to have been about as idle a dog as the Charterhouse and Trinity have ever essayed to educate, and yet his writing leaves an irresistible impression of French and classical scholarship, just because the Odes of Horace and a few French plays amused him so immensely that something from them always came into his head, all his life, whenever he grew excited with the work of trying to write. You remember his sketch of the little born flirt devastating the hearts of the male cherubs at a children's ball, "*nunc in ovilia, mox in reluctantes dracones*, proceeding from the lambs to reluctant dragoons"—I fancy those are the words, and few authentic Latinists can use their Latin with a wit and a relish like that.

To be amused by what you read—that is the great spring of happy quotations. Apart from professional writers, run your mind over those of your friends who have been offered the conventional "good educa-

tion" of public school and university. One obvious difference among them is between those who worked and those who didn't, those who accepted the offer and those who rejected it. But another and more vital difference is between those who were tickled by what they studied or neglected and those who, studious or not, were not tickled in the slightest. The former might be arrant idlers, and yet you will find them, at forty or fifty years old, making the aptest or most diverting applications of classical tags to common life and public affairs. The untickled may have won any number of scholarships and first classes but before they are thirty they are as dead to what they read in their youth as they are to the trousers in which they read it.

In a sense you might say that quoting is a branch of window-dressing, the Baconian art of "seeming wise"—of keeping a great house on quite a small income. But you could only say it in a shallow sense. The will to put all the stock in the window may be found in anyone. But the power to put it there is not to be had without some kind of genuine, if only whimsical, love for the stuff in itself. And this is an unworldly gusto. Of course a man who finds he has got it may turn it to some account in the world. A journalist like Andrew Lang lives by quoting. But no prudential motive could bring him the gift. It is, at bottom, a present from Nature, like the palate of the fortunate young waiter in a Paris café who won the prize the other day for quoting the vintage and the price of each of twenty clarets, after one sip of each. His, too, is a marketable talent, and yet one which no thirst for gold will confer. Nor yet an all-embracing thirst for clarets. Like your mere indis-

*Quotation* criminate bibber, your uncritically all-absorbent maw and gulf, the devourer of innumerable books will seldom give to that which he consumes the supreme tribute of perfect quotation.

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

# "SEZ 'E" OR "THINKS 'E"

I

As the girls crowd in or out of the factory gate you may hear the loud hum of the novelist's art in full play. One girl is relating aloud to a friend: " 'Well,' sez 'e, 'you come along 'o me or stop where y'are. Please yerself.' And so she gev it 'im straight. 'It's all off,' she sez, 'an' I'm goin' straight 'ome.' " That girl, you see, keeps close to drama. Her novel just gives you each character's most expressive speech. Therein it resembles *The Awkward Age* of Henry James, whom no factory girl could surpass in the nicety of his care to tell a story the right way.

But hear how another girl treats a similar theme. (There are said to be only eight quite different themes for a story in the whole world; so similarities often occur.) " 'E thinks to 'imself," says this girl; "we'd better know right off, 'e thinks, who's master 'ere. An' so 'e give 'er the office a bit stiff. Well, thinks she, ain't I to 'ave my bit o' pride, same as 'im? An' so she let 'im 'ave a fair nose-ender." This girl is a little sister of Dickens and of Tolstoy. She "goes behind" her characters *ad lib.* She assumes omniscience about their private thoughts. Her technique is that of R. L. Stevenson in *Providence and the Guitar* where someone or other is so often "thinking" this, "reflecting" that, or thinking something "in his heart" while saying something else.

But listen to a third girl's way of going to work on

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

the tale: "So don't arsk me what 'appened. I'm only sayin' wot our 'Liza tol' me. Somethink 'orful, 'Liza sez it were. 'Im orf the deep end, wantin' to ply lor' an' master to the gel, 's if they was married an' all; an' 'er as bad as 'im, the cat, 'oppin' it orf 'ome that stuffy an' contemshus you'd think blokes like 'im was sold orf barrers, three for twopence." In this girl the sovereign instinct of Conrad, as a technician, is manifestly present. Neither to give the story as drama, a succession of speeches and counter-speeches by the chief characters, nor to give it as a narrative related by the author with an assumption of knowledge of everything that has gone on in the characters' inmost hearts, but to give the story out to some other character to tell, to throw the responsibility for its truth and interest upon this other person—that is the third girl's impulse. 'Liza is her Marlow. Her heart tells her, as Henry James's told him, that if she gives the story simply and wholly as it struck 'Liza, "the terms of this person's access to it and estimate of it contribute by some fine little law to intensification of interest".

2

Which, then, is the best of these ways of going about it, where all three are at your disposal? You have to think first of the greatest, the most persistent risk that has always attended all spinning of yarns. People may disbelieve you. When Mr. Kipling's Ung drew the mammoth and the aurochs with a certain measure of confidence, the Neolithic public hummed and hawed over the drawings: "Yea, they are like—and it may be—but how does the picture-man know?" How does the novel-man know? The

nasty question is ever ready to rise in the novel-reader's mind if for a moment your hold on his imagination slackens. Is the novel-man a god, that he should be able to patter away on like this about all that is going on below the inscrutable depths of the heroine's violet eyes or behind that slighter screen, the hero's sun-gilded moustache? Perhaps he may not ask the question consciously and articulately. Perhaps he merely loses interest and puts the book down. But why has he lost interest? Because he has ceased to feel that curious quasi-belief which is illusion and which carries gentle and simple through novels and plays in a state of beatitude—"taken", as they sometimes call it, "out of themselves". *"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

Many novelists seem to have set out on the road with no fear, at first, of having any such awkward question to meet. A few of them, we may guess, never met it. Being natural spell-binders of the first order, they can give us, anyhow, such strong medicines to make us love them that the question never rises in the reader, however recklessly and even insolently the writer provokes it. Dickens is like that. Dickens, in the strength of his enormous enjoyment and humaneness, can carry off anything. He can bluff through anything. He is like one of those marvellous constitutions that can defy all common rules of health. But their happy fate does not prove that everyone else who sets out to tweak Aesculapius' nose will come off unscathed, nor is Dickens's magnificently artless art a thing to be lightly copied by any of us common, squat people.

Thackeray tried, at the start, the free-and-easy plan of the second factory-girl. He poked into the mind of every character of his, just as he liked.

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

Afterwards Thackeray would appear to have grown more nervous. He made for that first and most crowded place of refuge for embarrassed novelists, the autobiographic manner. In *Esmond* he relinquished almost altogether the questionable advantage of freedom to "go behind" his characters in general, having now acquired lawful and unlimited access to the mind of the all-important Colonel. Everything revealed to us in the story was now accountable; revelation was rationalised; it was rendered credible by the authority of an informant figuring inside the book itself and therefore more real to a reader's mind than any mere impersonal, abstract author. In Mr. Percy Lubbock's convenient terminology Thackeray had now "got the point of view into the book"; he had "dramatised the seeing eye"; he had "made objective" the mind that knew the whole story, instead of leaving it somewhere outside, as it is outside *Vanity Fair*. The picture on the screen had somehow swallowed up, and retained in its system, the man with the big lantern in the dress circle. The mysteriously all-knowing—and therefore questionable—operator had disappeared into the inside of his own handiwork.

3

Short of that, the neat craftsman has means of qualifying or abating his own perilous air of arrant omniscience. Much of it can, as people say, be "blamed off on to" one or another of his characters without actual recourse to the first person singular. Not to "go behind" his characters at large, but to "go behind" one of them with a will, and first of all

to make him well worth going behind—this was the darling device of that sage Ulysses among literary technicians, Henry James. He liked a story of his to come to the reader not as it had struck him, the unknown, the abstract and impersonal, Henry James, but as it struck some actor in the story itself, someone who might himself, by vivid description, be made real to the reader. *"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

So James took pains to put into the story some character, major or minor, who had a rich gift of social perception, a passion for making people out and getting clear about the working of their minds. This agent in the affair was to keep a kind of informal register of the successive states of other characters in the story; he was to divine their thoughts, to make fascinating guesses about what no one could really know. And to equip him for the delicate office, he was to have "a consciousness highly susceptible of registration". Over his shoulders, as it were, we were to see the register, "the terms of this person's access to it, and estimate of it, contributing, by some fine little law, to intensification of interest".

Though no one, that we know of, had said so much about it before, this dodge is a good deal older than James. Among dramatists it is an ancient habit to bring in subsidiary characters, a kind of "'tweenies" or odd men, with little else to do in the play but to say how one or more of its chief characters strike them. Cayley Drummle in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* has it for his main job to size up the pretty plight of Tanqueray and his wife and to speculate plausibly about things which they cannot very well say. The younger Dumas kept a large staff of such characters. The Greek dramatists made use of their

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

chorus for much the same purpose. Shakespeare in his earlier work used the Cayley Drummle method freely. Mercutio is by way of being a Cayley Drummle to *Romeo and Juliet*; later, he got the work, or its equivalent, done, under cover of irony, by instruments so unlikely to raise suspicion as the Fool in *King Lear*. In Mr. Galsworthy's *Strife* an item of this work of "registration" may perhaps be said to be done by the trade union official and the company's secretary in certain little interchanges of personal remarks.

A subtler way is not to assign the work to any one or two characters in a novel or play, but to parcel it out among the whole company; also to make them discharge the function not through set speeches of comment and reflection but by a sort of enhanced sensitiveness all round: means are taken to raise the pitch of moral perspicacity all round; you are led to feel that its characters look strangely and excitingly clear to one another, or that, if not clear, they at any rate pique and fascinate one another with the quality of their mystery, so that they are infectiously intent on making one another out. Thus in Synge's tragedies and harsh comedies the characters are all, in their several ways, intensely aware of one another; they all have their feelers out, such as they are, and so, for the spectator, the air begins to tingle with a communicative quickness. The "registration" business hums.

## 4

At any rate, so one may think. And yet, in the thick of these critical speculations, it is agreeable to

remember, now and then, how much admirable fiction has been produced in this world, in almost complete unconsciousness of any obligation to weigh any such considerations. I think now of those two sparkling examples of the art that are embedded in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. "All that I know of the matter", cried Miss Skeggs, "is this, that it may be true or it may not be true; but this I can assure your ladyship that the whole rout was in amaze; his Lordship turned all manner of colours, my Lady fell into a swound, but Sir Tomkyn, drawing his sword, swore he was hers to the last drop of his blood."

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

No doubt one may diagnose, in the authoress' opening words, some trace of an uneasy sense of a shortage of authentication for the narrative. That uneasiness is quite in Thackeray's middle manner, and in the only manner of Trollope. Possibly a similar embarrassment leaves its mark upon Lady Blarney's technique on the same occasion. "The Duchess", she preludes, "never told me a syllable of the matter, and I believe her Grace would keep nothing a secret from me." Still she goes on roundly: "This you may depend upon as fact, that the next morning my Lord Duke cried out three times to his valet-de-chambre, 'Jernigan, Jernigan, Jernigan, bring me my garters.'"

Here you certainly see, at any rate, the perpetual preoccupation of the author of fiction with the desire to be taken seriously as a witness and to produce a sound working illusion of veracity. But, on the whole, both ladies brazen it out with a high hand, as was the custom of authors in the golden and careless childhood of the art of fiction. In all this "I can assure you" and "you may depend" they are trying

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

how far the "mere muffled majesty", as Henry James calls it, "of irresponsible authorship" will go down with their public. Neither authoress, apparently, has considered how much might be done, as James says, to "enrich the business by the way"—shall we say, by enduing Sir Tomkyn or Jernigan with "a consciousness highly susceptible of registration", and then giving us no mere impersonal report of the swoon scene and of the triple call for the garters at morn, but the special impact of these phenomena upon those picked registrars.

How contrary to their practice is that of Mr. Kipling, and, still more, of Conrad! Neither is always content to put his story through a single sieve as it were—to give it as from the lips of one character who is himself a figure in the tale. Their charming jellies and soups have been strained twice over. To do the marvels he does in his *Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney*, Mr. Kipling first lets us have the whole affair through the mouth of A, a minor figure who is seen dimly, just inside the edge of the story. Then he lets us have the gist of the story through the mouth of B, a more cardinal character, who is represented as telling it to A. So what we get is Mr. Kipling's account of A's impression of B's impression of the facts—an expressed sense of a sense of something in life. And in this the story-teller's trade is far indeed from its primitive old marketing of such bald reports as Lady Blarney's brazen affidavit touching the garters.

There is no denying, so far as I see, that the resultant effect of veracity is worth the trouble taken. People used to take as a jest an old pantomime song:

The captain told the cook, the cook told the crew, *"Sez 'e" or*
The crew told me, so the story *must* be true. *"Thinks 'e"*

But, applied to the art of fiction, it seems to express a deep truth—that hearsay evidence is the best; and hearsay evidence two deep, the fact at two removes, may be best of all. Out of the mouth of two or three witnesses, one behind the other and passing on his evidence, is the truth, in this old art, best established. They say that sherry ought to live for a while in an old brandy-cask, so as to contract a certain convincing quality from the cask's genial timbers. Perhaps the most convincing sherries of all have lived in two successive casks, or in more. Certainly some fiction would seem to have extracted a new increment of validity from each human vessel that has apparently contained it on its way to the consumer. Unlike many of the middlemen of commerce these medial agents take nothing away from that which goes through their hands; they only add to it—humaneness, refinement, harmonics, second intentions, all sorts of good things. A high sense of their value may have set Conrad multiplying narrator behind narrator as he does, narrative within narrative, till you feel as if you were going into one of those little nests of many delicate boxes, one inside another, which make a child wonder will he ever reach the chocolate cream at their core. The heart of the tale appears like the fourth hand turf tip of the music-hall song:

I know a bloke wot knows a cove
  As 'ad it from a man
Wot saw a party wot told 'im
  'E'll win it if 'e can.

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

And yet it all comes out, in Conrad, wonderfully right and overpoweringly simple and true, as if every extra temperament through which he had passed the story had filtered it to a purer perfection.

## 5

And yet, again, just look at Jane Austen. Look at Fielding, at Scott, at Balzac. How little they seem to have thought about any of these mighty precautions and provisions for wayside enrichment. They "went behind" whomsoever they liked. They wrote as if they were the supernaturally trusted confidants of every one of their characters, good or bad. They seem to have cared as little about attaining the higher plausibility as the Homer of Godley did about writing the best Greek.

> Poluphloisboisterous Homer of old
> Threw all his augments into the sea,
> Although he had often been courteously told
> That perfect imperfects begin with an e:
> But the poet replied with a dignified air,
> "What the digamma does anyone care?"

If those great ones, living when they did, were good enough to be classics, would a novelist of equal genius, who wrote now, be also good enough though he played the technical game as naïvely as they did? If Shakespeare's advent had been deferred till now, would he have ever brought the chief character of one of his plays on to the stage to tell his audience in confidence, just after the rise of the curtain, "I am determined to prove a villain"? No pat and confident answer rises to my lips. Genius, no doubt, has

to live, with a will, the life of its own epoch: he who, like William Morris, attempts to live in the lost childhood of the world, always carries about him something of its dead coldness. One cannot quite imagine a Shakespeare of our days confining himself to the Elizabethan syntax and vocabulary. Would he, like a modern dramatist, discard the "aside" and the soliloquy too?

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

But then, again, is it certain that all this novel and intensely exacting technique, evolved for the novel by the critical genius of a few middle-nineteenth century Frenchmen and of Henry James, is really imperative? Or is there some bigger truth that they have not got hold of?—does it arise from something still unexplored, in the very nature of narrative fiction, that its richest and strongest practitioners should look like very standard-bearers of the cause of technical looseness? In some moods one may find oneself thinking that the curious state of absorption and semi-belief (never literal belief), which we call illusion in a reader's mind, may be actually favoured by a certain easy-going way of the writer's, an unguarded-looking habit, an unprofessional-seeming lack of technical apparatus.

Of course such doubts are flat heresy in the view of a whole school of intelligent and eager critics. They are so well equipped, and they feel so sure, that it seems almost like disobeying one's own conscience to fall short of complete and final agreement with them. Still, what can you do? Sceptical promptings will come. "My conscience says, 'Launcelot, budge not.' 'Budge,' says the fiend", and puts into your heart a fundamental and comprehensive misgiving like Harriet Martineau's occasional suspicion that

*"Sez 'e" or "Thinks 'e"*

the rising science of political economy was "all a mistake". What if the old slovens, the Thackerays and Hugos and Tolstoys, were really the practical men, after all, and knew what they were doing in all their ramblings and loquacities, as a crafty envoy does his country's business by dint of flirting and conviviality?

"What is truth?" "What know I?" Many admirable persons have a way of finding in every discussable question, of literary criticism as well as of conduct, a choice of Hercules, at any rate a choice of A. H. Clough, between "truth and falsehood", "the good and evil side". Yet the bearing of Montaigne and that of the far from jesting Pilate may sometimes be about as far as some of us can go without humbug.

# *Three Ways of Saying Things*

# THREE WAYS OF SAYING THINGS

I

In the innocence of second childhood Mr. Justice Shallow said to Ancient Pistol: "If, sir, you come with news from the court, I take it there's but two ways—either to utter them or to conceal them". That, as other children say, was all that Shallow knew. For of uttering them alone, there are three ways, apart from all the ways of concealing them. At any rate there are three ways of trying to make them attractive when uttered. You may state them about twice as big as they are, or about half as big as they are, or, if you have skill and complete confidence in your skill, you may state them only just as big as they are.

Of these three standard sauces for dishes of news or opinion the most widely used is the first. Its manufacture and sale yield a living to most of the world's party journalists—and not to the duffers only but to some of the most capable and readable. You open the London *Morning Post*, still a well-written paper, though somewhat battered by fate, and find this vivacious reflection on Mr. Lloyd George at the end of his war Premiership: "He left, not this party or that, but every political party, every respectable voter and, indeed, every thinking man the world over, sick to the soul of 'Lloyd Georgeism' and all that it implied". You see—"every" political party—even his own special band of leal dervishes. And

"every" respectable voter—even that churchwarden neighbour of yours who never, never would hear a word against Lloyd George, the "man who won the war". And "every" thinking man, "the world over", sick "to the soul"—every pensive farmer in the rural wilds of Spain, every meditative friar in a rock monastery in Tibet—all, all convulsed by the one nauseating vision of Mr. Lloyd George!

You may laugh. You may feel morally sure that no mere contemporary man, not even Mr. Charles Chaplin, has ever occupied the mind of every thinking man on this globe; that no universal turning of the spiritual stomach has ever been effected, even by emetics as powerful as Horatio Bottomley. And yet the author of that fantasia knew what he was doing. Even you yourself, with your Greek liking for moderation, are a little tickled with the fancy that history would at any rate be amusing if it were really like that. And to many loyal fellow-partisans of the writer —even to those who see how fantastic it is—it somehow gives just what they had wanted. It "gets there", as they would say. They feel better after reading it.

After all it is the natural or the chosen method of the finest pamphleteer now writing in English. "Nine out of every ten clergymen have no religious convictions"; the medical profession is "a conspiracy to exploit popular credulity and human suffering"; "the smattering of science that all—even doctors—pick up from the ordinary newspapers nowadays only makes the doctor more dangerous than he used to be". If you look at each passage by itself, all that you can say is "What rubbish!" Yet, in their completion, the Prefaces of Mr. Bernard Shaw, whence they come, can scarcely have been beaten, for

dynamic effect on people's minds, by anything since Huxley's lance-breaking in defence of Evolution. In fact they have done much to turn the laugh against some forms of mean delusion and cowardice. By bringing in this Beelzebub of enormous thousand-fold exaggeration he has routed out some quite sizeable devils. Or, like a rifleman, he has found that to point a rifle quite straight at a distant target on a windy day is not the way to hit it.

In this he keeps good company. To interest people in his contention that there was a lot of bad work going on in the Rome of his time, Juvenal makes out that the whole place was only fit to be put into an incinerator or towed out to sea and sunk. To give an arresting flavour to his remarks on some human deficiencies, Swift, through the King of Brobdingnag, puts it no lower than that the bulk of mankind are "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth". Almost every Leader of an Opposition, however talented, says of almost every big Government Bill which he has to oppose, that it is the most monstrous hash of crude and undigested proposals which he remembers in a long Parliamentary experience. A gifted Labour member who wants to say effectively that a new Pensions Bill should confer still more than it does on the pensioners, says that it is the most brutal insult ever flung in the face of the poor.

Nobody, speaker or hearer, thinks of believing these flourishes. Nobody would look up the previous hashes and insults referred to, so as to test the soundness of the eloquent person's comparison. No one imagines them sound. It is all a form, a flourish,

a figure of speech, and yet somehow it does serve a purpose, if only to convey a vague impression of robust and salutary trenchancy. To minds jaded with debauches of over-emphasis it does contrive to give a thrill. It bites, as a liquor three times as potent as whisky might amuse for the moment a palate which has lost the power to be tickled by the common whisky of this world.

2

An alternative sauce for assertion is hearty and spirited understatement. "Not 'arf", says the Cockney, when wishful to say that a thing is an ample whole. "The time has been", says Macbeth, "that, when the brains were out, the man would die, and there an end." The British schoolboy has no terms of praise more emphatic than "Pretty decent", unless it be "Good enough". To spring, in his audience, a vivid sense of the extreme barrenness of the Sahara, a British statesman describes it as "very light soil". To a woman bawling abuse from the door of an inn Charles Lamb imputes certain "murmurs, not very indistinctly or ambiguously pronounced". America does herself equal justice. She it was that first called the Atlantic "the herring-pond" and "the drink", and Noah's Flood "the big rain", and said that a rattlesnake's bite would "do you no good at all". The Greeks had a recognised name for this ruse of saying much less than you mean, in the hope that your hearer's mind will make good even more than the large percentage of discount which you have deducted from the truth—cunning fellow, casting your bread on the waters, under the form of a kind of

rebate, in sure and certain hope that it will return to you buttered.

Aristotle has warned us that when a great many people are found to believe in a thing, it is rash to think that you can just pooh-pooh it as bunkum, "and there an end", as Macbeth might have said. So when the children, the illiterate adults and the best writers of two hemispheres, in our time, agree with classical antiquity in deeming a figure of speech to be worth frequent use, that figure of speech is no cipher. To that, as Stevenson's wise pirate says, you can lay.

Is it that others, besides lovers, find things more piquant when they are presented in miniature? Or is the proper analogy to be found on the Stock Exchange? When we float some bubble statement are we likely to secure a bigger rush of subscriptions from the credulous by putting our stock on the market amazingly much below par? Little I know—only that all but a few whimsical persons seem to be urged, by some instinct of style, either to overstate things by 100 per cent or to understate them by 50 per cent, in order to make the statement tell better. The simple, unspoilt boy reports a certain dullness in a friend by calling him a "gibbering maniac". The simple, unspoilt Irish peasant merely says of an actual, a certified village idiot that "he's as apt to do one thing as another". Both only want to accentuate what they say—to give it a savour, like the best authors. Horses used to shy, says Mr. Kipling, when one of his characters smiled. Some other standard author would have tried to get the same effect by saying that the man was not exactly an Apollo.

*Three Ways of Saying Things*

There is yet a third sauce, but it takes canny cooking. Straight and narrow is the path, and few shall walk therein.

The most rousing preacher in Oxford, a generation ago, was Benjamin Jowett. He never, as some preachers did, put it to two hundred healthy young men, as a quite likely thing, that they might die in the next night and have to give God, about breakfast time, an account of their stewardships. Neither did he suggest, as other preachers did, that they were all going to live to be threescore and ten. What he said was, "I find it set down in tables that the average duration of human life, at the age of twenty-one, is about thirty-six years. We may hope for a little more; we may fear a little less; but, speaking generally, thirty-six years, or about 13,000 days, is the time in which our task must be accomplished." For myself and some others, at least, I can certify this: our young minds were as electrified by this quaint piece of precision, so unexpected from a pulpit, that they were instantly opened wide for the reception of what followed—that we should be shabby fellows if we spent any serious proportion of our 13,000 days in shirking or whining or spunging on the more manful part of mankind.

The late Lord Morley of Blackburn spoke once of "the irony of absolutely literal statement", and he used to practise a kind of Quakerish finesse of accuracy, with a lively relish of its surprising and amusing flavour for the palates of readers surfeited with the common bawling and bungling, the wild overstatements and wild understatements of public

dispute. It is true that this means of persuasion depends for a good deal of its force on the presence of a certain background. Anything stated with complete calmness and fastidious precision in the midst of a heated controversy has almost the effect of a satiric epigram. It gains, for your mind, an odd distinctness and authority; it has a cunning touch of flattery; it seems to summon you away from the company of these brawling fellows and to bid you use the brains with which it does you the honour of crediting you. If ever the supply of headlong overstaters and understaters should run short, the effectiveness of literalism might undoubtedly languish. "It's blokes like me", the brawlers may say to the literalists, as the burglar said to the judge of Assize, "that keeps blokes like you." But of that loss of a favourable environment there seems to be no immediate danger.

Some years ago we read with singular pleasure a new guide-book, by Mr. A. G. Bradley, to the English Lake District. Its specific charm was simply that it left out all the gush. You felt that he loved the places he was describing, but he never tried to exhale more passion or pathos than there were in him; about John Peel he was not laboriously plaintive; he did not quote Wordsworth to death nor assume that Wordsworth's spirit animated the whole Lake population; he was not afraid to confess that in presence of some much-hymned tit-bits of landscape, he had felt nothing more than a baulked willingness to be bewitched if only they would bewitch him. In short, he never tried to make the waters of his sentiment rise higher than their source. And the result was a book as refreshing to read, after most books of its kind, as a cool bath is to take after much dusty walking.

Piquancy of a similar kind was sometimes attained in the verse of Lord Houghton. After all the sound and fury of the traditional tirades of a slighted lover against the beloved object's perfidies, one's mind would give a little leap of joy on reading a lyric of remonstrance tempered, for once, by a sensitive justice.

> And yet you were not wholly kind,
> Nor altogether true.

Such a poet gives up much, but he may gain a choice quietude, a cool radiance of mingled sanity and sensibility, as moving to many civilised readers as a more Sapphic fervour.

## 4

In one large province of modern letters a golden opportunity would appear to await the cook who knows how to vary condiments. Let no one scorn the modern writer of advertisements. None of the trades that use ink has grown within living memory so wondrously as his. It is the one true Jacob's ladder of our time, the authentic Beanstalk. The middle-aged may remember the wonder and the friendly apprehensions of the Victorian period as it surveyed the ventures of the copious advertiser in those his salad days. They were the days of "Griffith, the Safe Man", of Daffy's Elixir for the ailing infant. "Good morning", you were hailed from the walls of a thousand railway stations: "Have you used Pears' soap?"

Most of the wise of the world would wag their heads in those early times and wonder would Mr. Daffy ever get back the money he must spend on his

large square mileage of enamelled tin? Would the public really buy the handiwork of Mr. Griffith, or would it only think that the man for it was someone, could he be found, who put into an extra thickness of cool steel on the doors of his safes the money that Griffith was using to beautify public places with his "slogan"? But time has vindicated the prudence of the Griffiths, the Daffies and the Pears. First-rate holiday resorts, even first-class European Powers, walk to-day along the trails blazed by these hardy pioneers in a relatively primitive age. Disputes between employers and workmen are waged in advertisement columns to-day; in the Great War the Allies raised by copious advertisement both the men and the loans needed to finish the business; and the British and the German army advertised in each other's trenches for deserters; some British farmers with land beside main lines of railways are said to find big boldly silhouetted advertisements to be the most remunerative of their crops; advertisement was the means employed, not long since, by a man who wanted to find a woman to murder; even the stone warriors lying face upwards on top of cenotaphs have before their eyes the names of "stunt" journals, daubed on the clean firmament in trails of smoke. Either it must pay to advertise much, or it must be vehemently imagined to do so. For advertising still goes up and up, like the Ancient Mariner's moon, and nowhere does abide.

Yet much of it is artless. Just look at the current advertisements of theatres. Every Tube station in London is papered with unescapable assertions that some play, or some actor in it, is that which any Tube traveller who cares about plays or acting knows that

it, or he, is not. Any number of plays too notoriously dull to live long in London are cried about the other cities of the island as "the success of the London season". A farce universally known to be middling is mechanically affirmed on the bills to be "the most screaming ever seen", and "a roar from the first word to the last". With a few fascinating exceptions the trade in drama seems to be prosecuted in a world of perfunctory fibs which no one believes, and which no one supposes that anyone else can believe. In the textile trades of the North they sell goods not merely as of first or second quality but as first rate, good, middling, middling to good, and many other fine shades: clearly they do not think that it would be of use to them to copy the quack medicine merchants and praise all their wares in terms so extravagant that a sane buyer is instantly steeled against believing even that percentage of these praises which may perhaps be true. But most of the theatre managers stand by the quacks, shoulder to shoulder; they still keep at a dead mechanical false pitch of emphasis, struggling feebly to arrest and thrill and achieving only a sort of violent flatness.

Perhaps they feel that, whether they like it or not, fate has set them to sell in a mart where all other sellers shout at the tops of their voices, so that, unless they shout too, they will never be heard. Many non-commissioned officers have a firm belief that without a due admixture of curses, an order is inaudible to a private, or that it will skid lightly off the private's mind without biting on that unstable surface. These simple faiths generally arise from states of things which have already passed away. And they have themselves helped to create new states of

things, by which their own validity is lessened. A private who has never known a sergeant that did not swear at him on all occasions is apt to be fascinated, rather than left inattentive, by one who leaves out the bloodies. The grand old damning and blasting sergeants have made the path straight for less richly expletory successors. By offering themselves as foils to the sergeant who swears not at all, or not much, they endow him beforehand with the charm of novelty; they give him, gratis, the advantage of the figure of contrast, so admirably used by Ovid—as the wise Moses says in the *Vicar of Wakefield*.

Why not try it on the playgoer? When will some shrewd manager be shrewd enough to perceive that in a world full of dull shrieking the still, small voice, the boast foregone, the falsehood dispensed with, the absurdity renounced, the fact understated, or stated with demurely delicate precision, have power to pique and almost to startle? Imagine a Tube station wall on which half the plays running were puffed in the insipidly bawling old way and the other half were sized up, with a fastidious nicety and containment, for just what they were worth—a weak third act admitted, and comparison with real greatness disclaimed—but still quite an amusing piece on the whole, as pieces go now. With what a glow of respectful liking one's heart would warm to the play thus announced! One would feel the same trust that the Harley Street manner engenders, compared with the yells of hoarse cheap-jacks who sell at dockyard gates a pill warranted to cure measles, toothache and rupture. There, perhaps, lies the future of scientific advertisement—not in the capping of superlatives nor in trying to shout a whole Stock Exchange down,

but in the exploitation of the curious and conciliating quietude of the conversation of Friends. The prudent advertiser may reflect that nothing he says can help his sales so much as the casual word of a man telling a friend that the goods are not divine perfection, but that they have points and will not let him down. Why not say just that in an advertisement? Or try to make the distributed advertisement the very nearest thing possible to a distribution of actual samples of the thing advertised?

A daily newspaper or two, besides, might possibly sing to their one clear harp in somewhat more divers tones than they do. Day differs from day in respect of the importance of the public events they bring forth. On one day, some years ago, there died both the heir-apparent to the British throne and the most famous British ecclesiastic of the time. On many other days there really is no public news of much moment. No doubt we ought, in a high moral sense, to see importance in everything. Amen, but still, humanly speaking, there are days rich in salient news and days far from rich in it.

What then shall the journalist do on the day poor in news? Accept and indicate the fact that history does sometimes sing rather small? Frankly say, as it were, to his readers, "No big news to-day. Still, there's what there is, for whatever it's worth"? Or try to work up the illusion that the dull yesterday, which he has to report, was really a very remarkable and sensational day? Fasten on one of the trivial affairs that took place and cry it up, "feature" it and boom it as an event that is shaking, or will shake, the globe and the firmament? Both courses are followed by various English journals. But most of

them follow the second. The larger number of editors seem to fear that they will have failed if they let any day pass without announcing some thrilling call upon the excitability of their readers. A few others cling to the notion that small beer is better chronicled as small beer and not as brandy or champagne. Perhaps neither school will prevail, within any measurable time, to the point of ousting the other. For as they vary in nature, so do their customers. There are readers of papers who actually do not find the absence of any special cause for excitement the same thing as dullness. They like the ordinary, average day, with its good human humdrum; they do not want to have its nature denied or obscured; they may enjoy the quiet, perhaps the humorous, record of its plain proceedings at least as well as that of days of European crises, diplomatic affrays, hecatombic accidents, celebrated cases in the courts, and deceases of "one of the few remaining links with the past". But there are also readers who would appear to have a sense of deflation unless they are kept well up to the mark with top-notes and high lights, breakings of world records and lickings of creation.

So be it; this is a free country; I have no "abstract and friarly" question of morals to raise; only one of artistic expediency. If anyone prefers either his beef without mustard, or his mustard without beef, let him be filled with the diet of his choice. All that interests me here and now is a certain slowness shown by the caterers of the newspaper press in following visible changes in the appetite of their customers. We may credit them with the warmest desire to do so, but desire will sometimes outrun performance.

*Three Ways of Saying Things*

Since the Great War there has been a fresh growth of the old habit of understatement in the conversation of British people. The war brought first a carnival of extravagance and exaggeration and then a somewhat Lenten fast from any delight in it. All the pots of rhetoric were first filled with foaming stuff, and then the froth was roughly blown away and, behold! the liquor was sour. Perhaps there never was a time when, in the mouths and minds of men and women of the nations lately at war, overstatement was so much out of fashion. But this might scarcely be guessed by a reader of those daily journals which are reputed to be fired, beyond their brethren, by a sincere desire for the pennies of their countrymen. They lose the scent; they flag; they fall behind the times, like those old-fashioned traders who still puff their goods as if the whole aim of their toils were just to achieve a single transaction with each reader of the puff and then leave him disenchanted and cursing—in these days of big business when shrewder dealers have found out that the really big profits are not to be got by disappointing all of us in turn.

Have I betrayed a partiality for one of these three devices for getting people to mind what you say to them? Well, even a judge may have his likings, but still, it would be unjudicial to set aside as common or unclean any of the various resources of emphasis used by sound artists. When Burke said that chivalry and honour had died out of the world at the French Revolution, he spoke bad history, but, as oratory, it was good. When Gumbo told the listening servants' hall at Castlewood that his mistress in Virginia had "fourteen eighteen" grooms, "twenty forty"

gardeners, "twenty forty" footmen, and "never could remember how many women servants—dere were so many; tink dere were fifty women servants", no doubt he brought off a handsome effect of affluence, as was his wish. Hamlet's assertion that 40,000 brothers could not, all together, love Ophelia as much as he, may not be first-rate science; but could you improve it as self-expression under the circumstances of the moment? High lights, half-lights, low lights—all are useful in painting, and so are statement, overstatement and understatement in letters. Given a congenial context, every one of them is right.

# *Only too Clear*

# ONLY TOO CLEAR

I

You will hear people say that this or that is only too clear. It is only too clear that Thompson—whom they do not like—has taken to drink, or that Brown —with whom they disagree—has not a leg to stand on. In these cases the "only too clear" may be taken to mean that the speaker only wishes that it *were* quite clear that the facts are as he states them. The words serve the same useful office as phrases like "It is beyond dispute that", or "All thinking men are agreed that" so-and-so is this or that. Every question-beggar has them in his tool bag. As soon as you hear them you know that some statement is coming which is not likely to go down without a good deal of ramming.

People say less often that some written thing is only too clear—that an essay is disagreeably lucid, or that limpidity has gone mad in somebody's novel or poem. Were we not taught at school to admire clearness as the queen of literary virtues? And "saying a plain thing in a plain way", "not beating about the bush", "simply hitting the nail on the head"—a dozen such phrases seem to show that in this matter the great world stands for once on the side of the schoolmasters.

They seem, besides, to imply that the act of writing is always a kind of rendering unto Caesar, or some other clear-minded and masterful person, of

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something predetermined, measurable and unmistakable, like a quarter's tribute, or a tailor's bill, something that has to be faced as it stands and got rid of, neither a penny more nor a penny less.

2

A few of us would like to pipe up, in a modest way, against this indiscriminate cult of clearness. We suspect that we are sometimes over-dosed with lucidity in leading articles and sermons, in novels and verse. There is that light-drenched controversial way of writing which seems to be always forcing us up against some glaring, tight-drawn dilemma: X, we are told plainly, must equal either A or B; if it equals A, then something, which establishes the writer's point, must inevitably happen to C and D; if it equals B, then some situation equally favourable to the desired conclusion must arise between E and F. We jib, we few plain people. In the rude world that we know, things are not like that: A never quite equals B, nor C either; any real C and D, or E and F, have enough pig-headed individual ways of their own to upset any calculation that they will give a certain exact response to a certain supposed stimulus from A or B or X. Moral stresses, somehow, are not transmitted with that fine precision; causation leaks, or it gets pushed out of its course just a little.

The syllogism itself grows suspect, rigged out though it be with the whole plant of logical clearness, major and minor premise and everything ostentatiously luminous about it, and nothing, it seems, to keep it from leading up to some conclusion that any honest mind will reject at sight, as the very mad-

ness of partisanship. And "crystallisation", that sovereign dodge—the compression and recompression and yet further compression of some crafty freak of argument or of detraction; the gist of the thing grows, at each stage of the progress, terser, more pungent, more crystal clear, more cunningly unqualified by any deference to the truth. No, the sun's lucidity used to seem straight enough, once. Then came Einstein and showed what a bad twist even those rectitudinous rays may contract. Such incidents make a man cautious. *Only too Clear*

You must, at some time or other, have groaned dumbly under a flood of clearness from a pulpit. First the giving out of a text, clear as noon, perhaps the words, "A city set on a hill". Then the illumination of this heavenly lamp by setting out, all round it, pound after pound of tallow candles. From word to word of the text the hapless divine straggles onward, match-box in hand. " 'A city', mark you. Not two cities! Not twin cities like Assisi and Perugia, each set on its Umbrian hill. Not one of those potent leagues of cities which shine in the storied page of history like constellations in the natural firmament! And yet a *city*! No mere village! No hamlet perched on a knoll, as the traveller to-day may see them in the Apennines", and so on and on till the martyred Christian below has to ask, in his heart, "Shall I never hit back?" as Juvenal did when his author friend recited the epic once more.

To relieve the lack of pence, which so often vexes first-rate men, a friend of my youth, a waterman on the Thames, used to dive into the river from Richmind Bridge, for gain. As he passed the tin can round the expectant crowd, before the performance,

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he used to explain: "I dives, gentlemen, I dives. I don't jump. I don't fall. I don't flop. I don't leap. I don't waller. I dives." If "style is clearness", as it has been called, and if there be nothing more to be said, my friend was a stylist to rank with many shining lights of churches and chapels.

3

Clearness at any price is supposably the aim of some writers of fiction and of that slender handmaiden of fiction, the "sketch". You know the insipid veracity with which Crabbe used to report some of the most trite doings of Nature and of man?

> Something had happened wrong about a bill
> Which was not drawn with true mercantile skill.
> So, to amend it, I was told to go
> And seek the firm of Clutterbuck & Co.

The spirit of Crabbe is not dead. You can feel it breathing faintly in a kind of modern prose that is cut up into little systems of infantine paragraphs. They all begin with "And". The whole work looks, at a sufficient distance, like a poem by Whitman or Rabindranath Tagore. It is turned out with an air of pride in the bleached and vacuous purity of its simplicity. The idea seems to be that if you can achieve a certain pitch of literal and copious fidelity in the description of a bald fact—any fact—that larks sing and nettles sting and so on—quite frigidly contemplated, you will at least have wedged one foot inside the doorway of the ante-chamber of Art, so that no one can kick you right out of the Palace.

The themes of these chaste exercises are often of a studied thinness. You may find that the author is

disclaiming, almost anxiously, the idea of tarnishing the minute mirror of his sensibilities with any breath of thought. "Nothing in my brain I bring"—he seems to hymn with a pious and complacent humility his freedom from intellectual baggage. *Only too Clear*

We simple readers begin to fancy we have been too easily taken in by the virtuous demeanour with which these simplicists make themselves perfectly clear about trifles, and throw floods of light upon the nakedness of their several small patches of land. We are too reverent and good-natured. We feel that the writing person is trying, at any rate, to become as a little child; and, of course, everyone ought to do that; so perhaps there is more chance of finding ourselves on the side of the angels if we do not pelt or boot him. If that is the line we take, any genuinely little child could lead us into a wiser one. For if you put four dots on one i and hope that a little child will think well of this abundance of lucidity in writing, your hope will come to naught. He will call you "a silly".

Worse, he may be affronted. Perhaps it might, to his mind, have been more civil to take it for granted that he knows about dots. So may we readers, however humble our intellectual standing, take a little reasonable umbrage at the assumption of writers that we cannot see a church by daylight. They are discourteous to us. "I do not rhyme", says the polite Sir Walter Scott,

> to that dull elf[1]
> Who cannot image to himself

[1] I cannot guess why Scott should have imputed dullness to elves. I had always thought of elves as quick-witted. Still, you can see what he means, in the main.

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this, that and the other thing that happens. But that is just what these too lucid folk do. They use us as dull elves or blind horses to whom no mere wink, nor nod either, means much.

Even in his most explicit moments a courteous writer will stop short of rubbing into our minds the last item of all that he means. He will, in a moderate sense of the term, have his non-lucid intervals. At times he will make us wrestle a little with him, in the dark, before he yields his full meaning, as God made the patriarch wrestle with the angel, to the patriarch's ultimate advantage. Or perhaps he will lead you right up to the verge of a full comprehension of what he is at; he will edge you into the right corner and put the pie within reach of your hand, and then he will withdraw gently and leave you to put in your thumb and pull out a plum and think what a bright boy or girl you are. As keenly as a good talker he will feel the value of ellipse, within the bounds of reason; he will know how much more blessed it is for a reader to guess right than to be told; know, too, that in a picture the high lights depend, for their value, on the low. Were it not so, we might find our best light reading in Acts of Parliament, because their whole aim in life is to be clear; the same bright, even light beats shadowlessly down upon every square inch of their level expanses of verbiage. Yet most of us find them plain stuff in the worse sense as well as the better.

4

On scores even graver, if any there be, than that of incivility you may demur to an overdoing of clearness. A writer might have all the good manners that

were ever housed in Versailles and yet make a show of clearness to which he has no lawful title. Until you know a thing right to the bottom, you should not speak as if you did; meanwhile, your description ought to be edged with something akin to that dim borderland in which your half-knowledge gradually loses itself; wisps of its mists should be visible in your report. *Only too Clear*

From age to age the value currently put upon clearness in writing varies rather freely. The times when it has stood highest were also times when our chances of getting to know, pretty soon, whatever there is to be known were over-rated, as we see now. A typical fruit of such a period, vigorous, positive, bold, sure of the sufficiency of whatever data it had, impatient of doubts, reservations or awe, was our received political economy of the middle nineteenth century. In it a thin, fallacious lucidity seemed to make everything clear, but did it by failing to see that there was anything to be cleared up where the worst difficulties lay.

The psychology accepted fifty years ago had the same illusory sharpness of outline, the same false finality. It took as the unit of mental life the idea, the single, separable idea, isolating each idea as a detached, clearly describable thing by which, in turn with other ideas, the mind could be wholly occupied. The books of psychology then in vogue might make you think of your consciousness as if it were a railway signal lamp, at one moment wholly red and nothing but red, at the next wholly green and nothing but green. Now, during the last forty years, as you know, psychology has looked more closely at the mental life and has found it a good deal less simple.

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The result has been an entirely new way of envisaging that life.

The unit of mental life, as modern psychologists see it, is not the insulated idea but the whole wave, or field, as it is variously called, of consciousness at any given instant. From moment to moment the mind, like an eye, puts itself forth on successive fields of consciousness, each field melting or modulating into the next in chronological order, like the successive photographs forming a cinematographic film. Each of these fields of consciousness has its centre of interest, on which there is at least a relative concentration of the mind. Of the contents of the surrounding portions of the field the mind grows less and less intensely conscious as their distances from the centre of interest increase; they fade away in widening circles of diminishing interest towards the margin of the field, and there, without any definite frontier line, they merge in the outer dimness.

What the modern psychologists mean is illustrated by what happens when you look at a landscape as a painter does, with your eye fixed on some central point in it—say, a tree in the foreground. That tree itself you realise fairly fully—the kind that it is, and its youth or age, and the shape of its trunk and the colour of its leaves—you know lots about it. If you keep your eye still fixed on that centre and ask yourself what you know about the trees a little to its right and left, you find you know something about them, but much less. You may feel sure that they *are* trees, and perhaps that one of them is shaped like a spike and another more like a cauliflower, and you are conscious of a mass of darker colour in one than in another. But that will be all, or about all. If you still

keep your eyes fixed and interrogate your sensations as to the trees still further to the left and right, you will find there are still fewer definite things that you can say about them. They are merely causes of a vague consciousness of masses of darkness, perhaps, against a lighter sky. You are aware of them; the landscape would not be the same landscape to you if they were not there, but you are not aware of them even with the semi-distinctness with which you were aware of the trees in the middle zone, still less with the intense and articulate distinctness with which you are aware of the centre of interest.

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So, in every moment of consciousness, every phase of feeling or thought, your mind is applied to some centre that it finds or makes for its attention in a field of consciousness which sinks into dimness and shadowy vagueness as it recedes from that centre towards an indeterminate border, lying you cannot exactly tell where.

The size of the field of consciousness varies a good deal, as between one person and another; and also as between one and another state of the same person. A man of genius—whether poet, scientific thinker or business organiser—may be supposed to have, at his best, a much greater width of field than most of us: he can see, in their right relation to each other, things so far apart that most of us do not find them both present on our field of consciousness at any one moment. A person ill, depressed or fatigued has his field of consciousness dwarfed for the time: a tooth-ache may contract the field to a speck; almost nothing may exist for you except a tiny detail of your body. Some stirring experience, the drastic stimulus given by some masterpiece in an art or by

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some personal emotion, may swiftly dilate your field of consciousness, so that you feel invisible things drifting into sight and hearing, and unhoped-for achievements of comprehension and insight coming as if magically within your power, like Lear's flash of recognition of what it means to be destitute—"O! I have ta'en too little care of this!" That is the natural utterance of a person whose field of consciousness has been suddenly dilated, bringing within its borders an unthought-of call upon sympathy.

So, to a writer happily engaged on his work and excited by it, there may come a curious extension of his ordinary faculties; he will find portions of knowledge floating back into his brain, available for use, which he had supposed to be thrown away long ago on the rubbish-heap outside the back door of his mind; relevant passages will quote themselves to his mind from books that he scarcely remembers to have ever read; and he suddenly sees germane connections where in his ordinary state of mind he would see nothing. The field of consciousness has expanded again. People of strong social instinct often derive the same experience from animated conversation; the exercise of their own vivacity stirs latent powers of apprehension in them; the area upon which they are able to draw for those piquant incongruities, which are the chief material of wit, is for the moment widened; the field of comic consciousness is enlarged.

In matters of conduct, again, you may find rapid enlargement of an ordinary field of consciousness leading to actions, heroic or criminal, which those who have done them can only ascribe, when the field has contracted again, to unaccountable impulse.

From the uncharted region of the outer consciousness one of these impulses strikes in and impinges on us, as the cyclones come up incalculably from the Southern Atlantic and impinge on South-West Britain. A kindred effect, or a simulacrum of these effects, is producible in some measure by alcohol and other drugs; no doubt their tragic hold on mankind is mainly due to their power of giving at least the illusion of temporary release from narrow, cold and cramping fields of consciousness. *Only too Clear*

In all these cases it is not that anything wholly unknown, wholly outside the range of the mind, has been brought within its reach. It is rather as if some outer zone of an estate which you already own were brought back into use after lying derelict. At the centre of the consciousness of each of us there is, as it were, the highly cultivated garden plot of our habitual thoughts, feelings, observations and memories; they are more or less arranged and registered; they can be readily summoned. Outside and surrounding this central disc of worked soil there extends an unmapped outer estate of dormant personal or ancestral memories, of residual impulses, of inchoate powers and dexterities, and of forgotten or unrealised knowledge. Each mind lives, like a prehistoric inhabitant of Britain, in a small clearing among thick forest; only, the forest is part of the mind itself, and the mind lives surrounded by all that dark part of its own contents and powers which at ordinary times remains potential only.

## 5

To reclaim for us some portions of that forest is the business of imaginative literature. It offers us

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inlets by which to penetrate into the surrounding twilight. At the climax of a great tragedy you feel sure, at any rate, that some sort of veil has been lifting; you are, for the moment, in a finer and more understanding state of yourself. A similar sense of release and of opened eyes can be generated by comedy, even low comedy; you may feel that, as Mr. Masefield says, the roystering scene in *Twelfth Night* "rouses the heart with the thought that life is too wonderful to end". You have the same sense of a glorious incursion, of having penetrated securely into an outer darkness, of having got beyond the region where the writs of ordinary thought run. The normal luminousness of the centre of the field of consciousness has for the moment flooded out all round over its dim borderland, lighting up what was previously the complete darkness outside, so that more and more new things swim into your ken as more stars do when you are coming up a shaft to the surface of the earth at night; and not only more things outside you, but more powers in yourself, more capacities for comprehension, co-ordination and sympathy.

Where Wordsworth's imagination has travelled far and has wrought hard to express itself, as in the *Intimations of Immortality*, he seems to have first experienced so unusual an enlargement of the ordinary field of consciousness that on the murky verge of the field certain mystic shapes—dim, but still shapes—have begun to take form for his mind, and this at a radius from the centre so great that for most of us it is a region of mere obscurity, yielding us nothing but some vague promptings and cravings and regrets. And then Wordsworth has contrived, in a remarkable measure, to express this visionary revelation of

his own in a way that renders mystic reverie in the reader more coherent and articulate than it could otherwise have been. But in doing this he has not achieved, nor attempted to achieve, the clearness of an advertisement.

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> . . . those obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings;
> Blank misgivings of a Creature
> Moving about in worlds not realised,
> High instincts before which our mortal Nature
> Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:

Well, that is wonderful, but it is not clear as an election poster is clear. It is almost as far from being clear as are the four Michelangelo statues in the Church of San Lorenzo at Florence, of which Pater says that "they concentrate and express, less by way of definite conceptions than by the touches, the promptings of a piece of music, all those vague fancies, misgivings, presentiments, which shift and mix and are defined and fade again, whenever the thoughts try to fix themselves with sincerity on the conditions and surroundings of the disembodied spirit". And again, Pater says that this memorial sculpture of Michelangelo's expresses "dumb enquiry over the relapse after death into the formlessness which preceded life, the change, the revolt from that change, then the correcting, hallowing, consoling rush of pity; at last, far off, thin and vague . . . the new body—a passing light, a mere intangible, external effect, over those too rigid, or too formless faces; a dream that lingers a moment, retreating in the dawn, incomplete, aimless, helpless; a thing with

faint hearing, faint memory, faint power of touch; a breath, a flame in the doorway, a feather in the wind".

That is a good deal to express, in four white marble figures, or in twenty lines of print. We need hardly expect so many elusive things to be expressed with the explicit lucidity of handbooks of popular science. Yet there is evidently some demand, even in such contexts, for a shallow positivism of clearness, a kind of insistence upon the trivially and superficially clear, a note of distrust and dislike of anything which calls for salutary efforts of comprehension or makes a demand upon us to disengage ourselves from common, indolent, incurious states of mind.

## 6

Ours is a free country; anyone may take his mental ease if he likes. Only, if you are going to stand out for clearness at any price, then you are going to shut yourself out from a good many things. For a good many things cannot be put quite clearly except by being put falsely. If everything in every shadowy corner of a Rembrandt interior were painted so that you could tell just what it was, what would become of the picture, its beauty and truth? Where would be the song that ends *Twelfth Night* if its inconsequence were gone and its unreason put to rights? It gaily defies any meagre and captious rationalism that it may meet in a reader's mind; it flaunts in his face a divine new clearness of its own, a clearness that passes understanding; with unsurpassable distinctness it calls up precisely the mood that its author desires, however incoherent the terms of the summons may seem.

Such incoherence or obscurity can scarcely be a blunder or an accident. All of us feel, while we delight in the song, that it must have a kind of submerged logic; we have faith in its fundamental coherence and rightness, although we cannot see them and cannot exactly say why we have faith. And this feeling of ours is accountable. We may suppose that Shakespeare wrote with his field of consciousness so enlarged as to bring within his view many connections between things apparently remote—at any rate not visibly connected within any common field of consciousness. Thus an utterance of his, framed in that rare state of his mind, may well seem disconnected to ours, and yet the connections that it assumes or implies may not be far out of our reach; though not at our command, an understanding of them may at all times be floating somewhere on the twilight border of our field of consciousness. And when we are fired by the beauty of the song, it may well be that this subconscious recognition almost breaks through into clearness; the underlying logic of the lines all but rises to the surface.

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From feeling that kind of faith in the greatest of imaginative writers it is not a long step to the feeling that every imaginative writer should have some such calls to make upon faith, and should not shrink from making them. Between that which we consciously know and that which we know in no sense at all, there extend the waters of our subconscious or incomplete and imperfectly available knowledge. In those waters he is a pilot licensed to ply; and we must leave him free, like a pilot, to do things which we cannot always quite follow, though we rely on him to bring us through. In fact we might doubt his command of his

craft and mystery if his doings were never even a little beyond us. If a writer is really lifted above himself; if as he writes he is veritably making forays far beyond our ordinary field of consciousness, even beyond his own as it is at most times, it is not merely pardonable that his written report of these raids should ask us for some little effort of comprehension; if it were all a plain tale you might even suspect that he had not gone very far.

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## 7

In some modern writers this enigmatic element has gained special notice. In Meredith's work much seems to be obscured, not by any lack of light but by too much of it; you see his outlines of things blurred with excess of brilliance, as the sun's is at mid-day. Meredith dazes you only too much, as Professor Elton says, with a "sparkling mist or spray of commentary, an emanation of bewildering light", which he sheds round the characters and events of his novels. In making out his reports on his travels beyond the pale, he pours out a turbid flood of illustrative images, one tumbling over the other, so that you feel like Benedick when Beatrice chaffed him—as he says, "huddling jest upon jest, with such impossible conveyance upon me that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me".

Such golden profusion resembles to some extent the speech of certain characters in Shakespeare for whom one cannot help feeling that Shakespeare had a special liking—Mercutio, Falstaff, and the Biron of *Love's Labour's Lost*, characters of an immense elation and gusto, whose abounding enjoyment of

the human spectacle cannot always wait to complete one piece of self-expression before rushing on to another. And it seems possible that the ambiguities of Meredith, like the tumbled imagery of these most Shakespearian of Shakespeare's characters, may be the clearest practicable expression of a state of consciousness now only a little outside our reach, a state of intellectual high spirits and communicative quickness which could afford to be enormously elliptical in expressing itself, because everyone else's receivers would be perfectly tuned to receive its messages. You may even get glimpses to-day of small social groups of quick-witted and quick-sympathied people among whom, at moments of mutual stimulation, ideas can be exchanged in a condensed, highly figured code of speech, like Meredith's, without seeming opaque or contorted. And at such times one may easily feel that it is not all affectation or precocity, but that perhaps these difficult people are difficult only because they know a thing or two more than we do.

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Another modern writer sometimes charged with heresy by the high-priests of clearness is Mr. Yeats, in whom the obscurity is not the Meredithian dazzlement with excess of offered light, but a real dusk, purposely courted. The wooing of this twilight has often been defended by Mr. Yeats on a quasi-spiritualist theory of composition which leaves me wondering. But many people have their principles all bad and their practice all good. Though we may make little of Mr. Yeats's doctrine that poetry ought to be "got 'tween asleep and wake", as Edmund in *King Lear* describes legitimate heirs, still one must admire the wanton heed and giddy cunning with which, both in verse and in prose, he edges lucidity

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with a fringe of dimness, just as the clearly seen centre of the landscape that we spoke of is hemmed with circles of the indistinct. If Mr. Yeats describes a wood in summer he can give you a sense of elfin presences within it; and when he expresses a mood, he gives you the impression of a small emergent and expressible part of a much larger, less definite whole, submerged first in semi-transparent subconsciousness, and then in the opaque depths of still more rudimentary subconsciousness, much as a little coral island or an iceberg is related to a far greater bulk under the sea. By constant renunciation of the obvious, tempting climax of a demonstration; by shunning the word or phrase which, in seeming to clinch a matter and hit a nail the last stroke on the head, gives the reader a delusive sense of finality where there is no finality; by heading off the kind of clearness which is gained only by airily treating something unknown as if you knew it, Mr. Yeats may dissatisfy readers who crave for the universal cocksureness of bad journalism and of minor politics. But, after all, the attitude, the bearing towards a theme, is that of Socrates; it is that of Montaigne; it is that of modern science, which, the further it goes, guards itself the more carefully against any assumption of having attained finality.

## 8

Such writers may carry a wilful unclearness too far. If so, they differ only by a few degrees from the greatest of imaginative artists. In some of these the enigmatic suggestion is conveyed under the most cunning semblance of absolute clearness.

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The boat rocks at the pier o' Leith;
Fu' loud the wind blaws frae the ferry;

The whole of Burns's song has an air of straight dealing; a child can understand the first intentions of all the words, but these seeming simplicities are craftily charged, by the subtlety of their choice and arrangement, with secondary purposes, ulterior intimations; they evoke ideas, or prompt you to group your thoughts, in ways which the words, in their primary senses, will not account for. In the much-quoted lines,

Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye,

all that is said, on the surface, is an old truism; you might excusably say that Nashe was putting a commonplace baldly. Yet you don't. For you feel that the show of shallow clearness is illusive; behind their obvious meanings the words have been given an energy that can raise in you certain emotions as unmistakable as elephants, although also as undefinable. Among the youthful stuff, clever and bookish, that makes up most of *Love's Labour's Lost*, you strike here and there on lines rich in that virtue, such as Armado's note about Hector:

The sweet war-man is dead and rotten; sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried; when he breathed, he was a man.

Coming in the middle of so much writing which strives hard to be full of meaning, beauty, and wit, and to get the last ounce of its meaning well out, such passages shine the more brightly, because they come of a more cunning art that knows how to charge

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with high evocative power phrases which on the face of them may be platitudinous to a degree approaching drivel. Here, of course, we tread close to one of the thorniest of critical thickets. All the prickly topic of symbolism, with its malign power to set the wise by the ears, is very near. Mine be it to steer clear of the question whether this special quality of poetry, this keeping open of its communications with the subconscious part of our mental life, is mainly a Celtic contribution to literature or is a survival from the primeval poetry and legend of many races. And also clear of the question whether, in this effort to unpack the luggage of the mind, the imagination is trying to get past the malignity and obstructiveness of a delusive world of sense and of intellect—a hostile host of "things" and of reasoned thoughts—or whether things and thoughts are themselves portions of Reality, and not even the blackest sheep among her flocks. All that I want to touch here is the contrast between the traditional pregnancy of all great art—you find it even in the rather hard, dry poetry of Pope—and a kind of writing in which, almost as a matter of principle, nothing is left unsaid and no more is meant than meets the ear. You read this super-lucid stuff; you do your best to believe that the writer must have got hold of something more than he directly says; you hope he may be like the Sphinx, who used often to seem to be asking her clients an easy one when she really gave them something much tougher to tackle. But no; the pellucid rubbish has no camouflaged fullness of meaning; it is all like hard, literal painting on tin; the trees have no dryads; and the Sphinx is just a foolish old lady without any secret to keep or to tell.

## 9

How much one has to leave out! Here is nothing said, nor room left to say it, about the cardinal difference between the expression of obscurity and obscurity of expression. Of course it is no virtue to say relatively simple things with a relatively high degree of indistinctness. Indeed it must be half the work of education to cure this malady in its grosser forms. You find it in schoolboys' essays, where it comes of helplessness, and in the work of some minor poets who want to be crepuscular and to bring on Celtic or other twilights, but do not know how. It is for criticism to distinguish this obscurity of the confused or astigmatic mind, or of affectation, or of a small or ill-used vocabulary, from that other element of enigma which may remain when the greatest powers of expression have been most strenuously used. Perhaps one might say, roughly, that it is the difference between a muddled statement of something already known, and an indication—necessarily indeterminate and ambiguous—of some unexplored possibility of further knowledge. Since Einstein made his great finds we have all seen how far from clear the most faithful statements of an unfamiliar fact of nature may be. They have to partake of the dim profundity of their theme. But some of the accounts that appeared in the press were perfectly clear because they were perfectly bad and left out whatever it needed some skill to convey. Just like that is the contrast between excess of clearness in imaginative art and its just renunciation. *Only too Clear*

Another shoal that deserves to be better buoyed out than can now be done here is the difficulty of

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teaching the young the proper limits of clearness. In most of the workaday uses of the spoken or written word we suffer much more from want of clearness than from excess of it; so it might seem like reversing the engines of education to warn a boy or girl that one may be too clear. Anyhow it is not done; and now that we have had nearly fifty years of popular half-education, we naturally have an enormous number of people whose education has not reached the point at which any critical attitude towards this virtue of clearness is practicable or, perhaps, safe. Hence a strong economic pressure, which cannot be ignored, upon popular writers in the direction of extreme clearness or at least the appearance of it. A common result is a kind of writing rather like a watch with a highly luminous face, but no hands. Or it is like a tree with no roots—nothing more about it than what first takes the eye, whereas the best of imaginative writing has its leaves in the light and its roots in the darkness, and does not deny its own nature nor the continuity of the known with the unknown.

# *Putting in and Leaving out*

# PUTTING IN AND LEAVING OUT

## I

THERE are two ways of making a statue, if you know how. You may plump it out from within, or you may pare down to it from without. You may take a lath and stick more and more clay or wax round about it, till you have thickened it into a bust. Or you may take a block of rough stone and chip away at it till there is nothing left but a bust.

One sculptor will feel his work going better when he is building out towards the shape that he wants to fashion; another when he is cutting in towards it. The one would seem to be more happily stirred by a sense of making something out of nothing—relatively nothing; the other by a sense of releasing a pre-existent beauty from a kind of limbo. The one feels as if he were assembling granules to make up a gem; the other, as if he were disengaging a natural gem from its matrix—stripping it of a coarse sheath of waste stuff that clogs and hides it. To the one the essential act of creation is a putting in; to the other it is a leaving out.

Be warned—the distinction is not a profound one. Still, it may be useful, if cautiously used. It serves, at any rate, to illustrate a variation between the modes in which different writers address themselves to a new piece of work. Some, like Swinburne and Victor Hugo, you seem to see hunting about for any significant word they can add. Others, such as Bacon and

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Tacitus, are as visibly searching for words to omit. "A boss word! Let's work it in!"—that is the manifest impulse of the inclusionist, as you may call him. "Now can't I do without that word?" is the question that besets the exclusionist as he scans the too, too solid flesh of his draft manuscript and thinks how to melt out of it just an ounce more of fat.

2

The study of this contrast in procedure might be easier if people cared as much about seeing the writer's art in the rough as they care when the art in question is painting. The happy painter's prefatory sketches for his monumental canvas of "King Alfred in the Neatherd's Hut" are eagerly sought and justly cherished by the world. The hems and haws of his genius, as it clears its throat before the bell-like note comes forth, can be exhibited in Bond Street, with a proper charge at the door, and with critics pointing out that the half is often more than the whole. But when shall we see a public gallery hung with early drafts of "Babbitt" or the first false starts and infant stammers of *When Winter Comes*, or the original sketch, the second version, the revised typescript, and the corrected proofs of *Won by a Neck*, or all the abortive half-pages on which the Olympian leader-writer tunes his thunderous instrument before breaking into the effective peals that we know?

> Alas, what boots it with incessant care
> To ply the homely, slighted writer's trade?

But even to this cold rule of neglect there are bright exceptions. At times the waste-paper basket does give up its dead, and then a masterpiece known

to the world may be seen struggling up into completion in one or other of the two ways here noted. In the many series of photographs of "celebrities at every stage of their lives" in popular magazines you may see how some of the great and wise have put on flesh since childhood, whereas others who are now but small herbs of grace are seen to have set out on their course as decidedly full-bodied seedlings. So is it with some great books or plays discovered in process of growth. Some of them you find to have swollen from the most thinly mewling and puking infancy to their magnificent adult girth and stature. Others have steadily diminished in bulk as their elements of force and fire and music have been gradually set free from hampering masses of dead verbiage which at first muffled their significance.

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Of works of art which have swelled from the first, the major plays of Ibsen seem to be fortunate instances. Through infancy and youth, to their coming of age, the benign process may be conveniently viewed in the sympathetic book that William Archer filled with Ibsen's notes, scenarios and early drafts. Ibsen's first beginnings may strike you as neither bulky nor good. Some basic idea or inchoate subject presented itself, and the work began coldly and scrappily. Without delight or animation the craftsman laboriously worked up a scraggy lay-figure out of the clay. And then, no doubt, the divine accident happened. The magical interaction of technical effort and imaginative insight commenced. From the moment when that genial miracle began to come off, in the bosom of Ibsen, the little original nucleus of the thing seems to have continuously waxed in stature as well as in grace; good things came into sight, out of

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nowhere, as stars seem to do, or somehow he managed to summon them out of the vasty deep by conjuring or by hauling amain.

Think of *A Doll's House* and count up the touches that you remember as giving the play its edge and harsh savour. There are the macaroon business, the facile fibbing by Nora, the Christmas tree, the glimpse of Helmer as aesthete, Rank's malady, Nora's thwarted appeal to him, Helmer's gust of vinous amorousness, the tarantella, the silk stockings, the repartee "Millions of women have done so". Scarcely one of these things can be found, even in germ, in the first draft of the play. They were imposed on that early sketch. The thing grew like a piece of encrusted architecture. First came a bare frame, just a thing made to wear decorations; then the precious stones, the gold and the mosaics were fastened upon it, as they were built on to the skeleton of St. Mark's at Venice until by degrees the thickened walls glowed into full expressiveness. "And he's cleckit this great muckle bird out o' this wee egg!" said Saddletree admiringly to Dumbiedikes, when the learned counsel for Effie Deans sat down at last. With similar emotion we watch Ibsen expanding the first written germ of *A Doll's House* into the large and grim masterpiece that we know. "There's a chield", we feel, "can spin a muckle pirn out of a wee tait of tow!"

3

Of the opposite school the head man is Shakespeare. Shakespeare seems to have shunned, wherever he decently could—and sometimes where the strict ethics of letters might say that he decently couldn't—

the pang of sitting down to a desk with nothing to hand except pen, ink, paper and the uncertain gusts of the creative spirit. If possible, he made the job an affair of revision or disengagement—the paring down and burnishing of some pre-existent work, or the extrication of a core of significance and beauty from the clumsy Colossus left in the stoneyard by some previous mason. One can imagine him feeling his art might be dulled or held down to the earth by the coolie work of making all his own raw material first. Sooner than that, he would take someone else's middling play or novel and lick it into fineness; or out of the rough rock of some old chronicler like Holinshed he would carve just what he wanted, seeming sometimes to value himself on doing not a bit more of this chiselling-out than he need, so close does his metrical dialogue come to the prose he found in those naïf historians. Like the sagacious builders in Renaissance Rome, who quarried the stone for the Vatican out of the ruins of the Coliseum, he took every bit of ready-made stuff he could find.

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Of course he was more free to do this than anyone is now. No fuss was made in his day if a new writer took from an old one whatever material he found congenial for his own operations. Greene, no doubt, spoke nastily about an upstart crow decked in other birds' feathers; nobody else seemed to have minded, so long as the result was agreeable, any more than they reprobated the practice of an equally spirited acquisitiveness by British heroes in the Spanish main. But nowadays one cannot quite see Sir James Barrie meeting the public demand for another of his charming plays by taking down a dusty volume of W. G. Wills or of the author of *Caste* and falling to work

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with a blue pencil. The ears of critics would prick up at once; their neck hairs would bristle. Like our young married couples after the War, the gifted literary cuckoo of to-day is oppressed by an intractable housing question; people who, with a little assistance, might build Vaticans find their genius cramped by notice-boards to the effect that anyone who carries off any more of the Coliseum will be prosectued.

Under this persecution only one way is left to the modern writer who feels that the technique of the sculptor in marble is the technique for him. He must make his own marble. For each work that he meditates he must lay down first a sort of Carrara to quarry it out of, and then hack away so much of this prior work of his own hands as is not the latent figure, the immured Sleeping Beauty whom it is his business to disengage and to awaken. Or you might put it another way, especially if your author be young. His work, in the rough, is a kind of hulking 'prentice figure of himself; and then he divests this lumbering hobbledehoy of his graceless superfluities of verbiage, his trumpeting, booming, grimacing and facetiousness; he trains the creature down; he files and bevels it into concision, proportion, modulation and wit. And so the whole of the latter half of the affair is a sustained attempt to leave things out.

Here, too, we have our instances and documents. Shakespeare himself, who illustrates everything, seems to have had a habit of roughing out his plays pretty large and then cutting them down for presentation to the world. How else account for the unabridged *Hamlet* or for the rough-hewn mass of *Antony and Cleopatra*? About half of each of these works is about as much as any modern manager can induce the

public to relish; and, from all that we can gather about the theatrical habits of our forefathers in the spacious days, the only doubt is whether they would go even as near as this to sitting out *Hamlet* acted *verbatim*. Possibly the entire magnoperation was first tried upon the vile body of some audience assembled for the experiment, as the authors of modern Christmas pantomimes sometimes put in about 50 per cent more of text on the first night than they propose eventually to use; then, observing what goes down well with the house, and what fails, they cut away the least successful third part, and there they are. Shakespeare may well have done much the same after first nights or at rehearsals. We cannot fancy him vowing he never, never would let some darling child of his invention be cut, like the fond mother in the law-suit heard by Solomon.

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4

Perhaps the best illustrations of this practice are some modern instances, because so many modern writers speak much, and some few speak so well, about themselves and their methods. The late Monsieur Sardou was a sovereign prince of "best sellers" among the dramatists of his time. That, in the fuller sense of the words, he was far from a great dramatist is the faith that fire will not burn out of me. Still, I should be almost as ready to perish, at least in some figurative sense, at the stake for the belief that he was a very clever one and a veritable master of the grammar of playmaking. No dramatist can have added more cubits than he, simply by taking thought about these technical matters, to a somewhat low artistic stature. He had brought himself to resemble

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a house swept and garnished up to the nines, all ready for the spirit of genius to enter in, if ever it should care to. Besides he was the most fluent of those engaging workmen who will tell any passer-by the way they set about it.

"My instinct", he said in one of these chats, "is always to cut down." But how was he first to procure that which should then be cut down? He explained. He began at the very beginning. His plan was first to lay down the rude geological strata from which the vein of marble should come. He kept a large set of letter-cases, or pigeon-holes, and whenever he had an idea for a play he would file it in one of these. Then he would go on with life—the daily paper, the latest books, the common round; and whenever his eye or his ear lit on anything that seemed to have something to do with one of the filed and waiting ideas, this, too, would be filed in the pigeon-hole which the idea inhabited.

Left thus to itself it seems that this fundamental stuff of the drama would sometimes begin to ferment. In this it did not strictly follow the accepted lines of geological procedure. But Nature, as well as mankind, may let herself use a mixed metaphor now and again. One may not readily connect full pigeon-holes and files of cuttings from the press with the cup of a glorious drunkenness. But M. Sardou appears to have felt that of some letter-case, or of a corresponding receptacle in his mind, we might say now and then what Mr. Yeats has said of the starting point of another kind of creation in art: "All is in the wine-press, all is in the drunken ecstasy, and the grapes begin to stammer". So, from the stammering lips of his *dossier*, M. Sardou would take down a first draft of the first act of a play.

The draft was pretty rough. We are to understand that the stammer was no small impediment—that the lips were, in the richer sense of the phrase, distinctly not touched. What Sardou thus obtained was —if you will give plenary absolution for all this jumbling of metaphors—a lump of marble, clumsily hewn—formless and lustreless stuff, like the world at 2 A.M. on the first day of creation, or like the old grammarian's book, in Browning— *Putting in & Leaving out*

> tremendous,
> Monstr' inform', ingens, horrendous.

It contained, without grace or finality, not only all that might in the end be found to be to the purpose, but everything else that could even come within hail of it. It was almost as if Shakespeare had first written something like Holinshed's *Chronicles* for himself, by way of making a start on his own *King Henry V*. All the raw material had now been acquired. The mining or quarrying labour was over; only the diamond-cutting had to be done, the dropping of spare bulk, the tactful omissions, the gainful and creative destruction.

One must be careful not to overrate the ease of these fruitful operations. Just to make the general idea clear we have to put things in a form artificially simple. So it may read as if one who wishes to begin, say, a pastoral drama had but to confine together in one pigeon-hole some notes of the normal prices of sheep at the period chosen, the figures of annual rainfall in any particular Forest of Arden selected, a few vital statistics of the shepherd's trade, with anything casually obtainable about the state of education among local shepherdesses, their previous family

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history, if known, and average age when married, and any relevant odds and ends that might turn up in the daily papers. The prospect of any payable fermentation would be so slight that practical wisdom would write it off as desperate. A character in one of Gilbert's operas gives a philosophic analysis of the ingredients of such measure of perfection as is attained by the average British officer of dragoons. But when he says of these elements:

> Boil them together and take off the scum
> And a heavy dragoon is the residuum,

the precept can hardly be taken so strictly "to the foot of the letter" as the similar recipes of the admirable Mrs. Beeton. So is it, too, with Sardou's complacent cookery-book. Its value is only illustrational. But if used with the caution due to a naked light carried in places full of delicate fabrics it does help you a little to see what is meant by the sculpturesque way of writing.

## 5

At a certain point in the writing of his *Golden Bowl* —the book of his which satisfied him most—Henry James wrote to tell his literary agent that he was within 15,000 words of the end.

> But I can only work in my own way. . . . I have really done it fast, for what it is, and for the way I do it—the way I seem condemned to; which is to OVERTREAT my subject by developments and amplifications that have, in large part, eventually to be greatly compressed, but to the prior operation of which the thing afterwards owes what is most durable in its quality. I have written . . . 200,000 words of G. B. . . . and you can imagine how much of that, which has taken time, has had to come out. It is not, assuredly, an economical way of work in

the short run, but it is, for me, in the long; and at any rate one can proceed but in one's own manner.



No, the laying down of quarries is not a thing that can be done in a hurry, by man or Nature. But if it be the only way to get some kinds of good statues, what would you?

So to one man the art of imaginative writing figures itself as something akin to Nature's way of creating an animal—the fertilising of some tiny nucleus or cell of matter or invention, and then the perfecting of this embryo by a process of accretion. To another the art appears as something more nearly correspondent to Nature's way of creating a mountain peak—first the heaving up of some blunt monstrous bulk of rumpled rock and then the carving of a fair spire or pinnacle out of this mass by plying patiently the chisel and mallet of frost and the sun. To the one brooding mind the essential part of its task is an effort of amplification. To the other, all is denudation. And what comes of the one may be just as good as what comes of the other.

# *The Literary Play*

# THE LITERARY PLAY

WHEN a play is called literary it is, as a rule, implied by the speaker's tone that it is much the better for being so, or else that it is much the worse. In the way of praise you find, for example, a popular dramatist, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, declaring that the lasting value of any play is "in exact proportion to its literary qualities". You find a very different dramatist, Mr. Yeats, making it his warmest commendation of a new play that it is "literature", or dismissing the plays of Dion Boucicault as bad because they "have no relation to 'literature'". And you often hear it said that endowed theatres must do the drama good because they would give more chances of performance to "literary plays". On the opposite side you find another popular dramatist, Mr. Sydney Grundy, saying: "How many a sound and stirring play has held an audience firmly in its grasp until—thud! down comes a chunk of 'literature' like a brickbat. . . . Away goes the play, away go the players, and we see nothing but a dismal library and an old professor, in blue spectacles, with a wet towel round his head.' And you find as competent a critic as the late H. D. Traill saying this: "Of every drama, as we moderns understand the term, it may, I hold, be affirmed that, though some of them may, and do, contain great literature, they are, to the extent to which they are literary, undramatic, and to the extent to which they are dramatic, unliterary". Perhaps you

may trace an approach to the same feeling in a more weighty critic, Professor Saintsbury. In his introductions to Dryden and Shadwell, for instance, a play's merits "of situation and the stage" are sharply contrasted with those "of dialogue and literature", and a frequent recurrence of sentences like "I am not myself fond of the theatre", and "having myself no very intimate practical knowledge of, or affection for, purely theatrical matters", seems to convey a suggestion that to be dramatic is a sort of minor peculiarity, a not necessarily harmful fad, in which certain works of literature may perhaps be indulged. As to most of the actors and managers, the first thing to come into their minds if you call a play literary is that it must be dull to see, and no good to act in. At one extreme, then, you have Traill's saying that "he who says 'literary drama' says 'picture statue', says 'flat relief', says 'miniature-fresco', or connects in a kind of centaurine union any other two mutually exclusive forms of art"; and at the other extreme you have a contemporary dramatist's saying that "to tell an interesting or amusing story through the medium of dialogues which appear to be the natural conversation of human beings—that *is* literature".

Well, perhaps you may begin to untie a part of this tangle of cross-meanings by noting that in some of these cases the word "literary" is used to denote faults in plays which would be just as bad faults in any other kind of writing. Clearly it means, in some cases, simply turgid or over ornate or too far removed from living speech. When Swinburne's tragedies, with their long duels of persistent eloquence, are condemned as "literary" the word is used in a sense in which it would be equally to the point to censure

as "literary" the many passages of Scott and Dickens where simple people are made to talk "like printed books". Only, we have an alternative phrase for "talking like printed books", and that is, "talking like play-actors". The word "literary" has been prudently chosen by the party of the theatre to express this defect, but the defect itself has always been at least as characteristic of drama as of any non-dramatic kind of writing. Even now it may be found abounding in those writers for the stage who are most often held up as examples of severe concentration on the attainment of strictly dramatic ends. Everyone remembers how Sheridan, when he was writing *The Critic*, poked fun at this special "literariness" of the stage, where he makes Puff ride a metaphor to death, as a bookish schoolboy might do, in the lines:

> Can the quick current of a patriot heart
> Thus stagnate in a cold and weedy converse,
> Or freeze in tideless inactivity?
> No, rather let the fountain of your valour
> Spring through each narrow stream of enterprise,
> Each petty channel of conducive daring,
> Till the full current of your foaming wrath
> O'erwhelm the flats of sunk hostility.

Perhaps the Englishman who is most often cited as a model of technical expertness in dramatic writing is Sir Arthur Pinero, and in his play *The Profligate* he almost excels, unconsciously, the conscious drollery of Sheridan by making a Scottish lawyer, sitting in his office-chair, with all his black tin deed-boxes about him, comment as follows on the old doctrine of the advantage of sowing wild oats:

> "Renshaw, do you imagine there is no autumn in the life of a profligate? Do you think there is no moment when the accursed crop begins to rear its millions of heads above ground; when the rich man would give his wealth to be able to tread them back into the earth which rejects the foul load? . . . What of the time when those wild oats thrust their ears through the very seams of the floor trodden by the wife whose respect you will have learned to covet? You may drag her into the crowded streets—there is the same vile growth springing up from the chinks of the pavement. In your house or in the open, the scent of the mildewed grain always in your nostrils, and in your ears no music, but the wind's rustle among the fat sheaves. And, worst of all, your wife's heart a granary bursting with the load of shame your profligacy has stored there."

The theatrical specialists call this sort of stuff literary, and the non-dramatic writers, about equally fairly, call it histrionic. It is, in fact, simply bad writing of a certain sort, whether for the theatre or any other purpose. And when the dramatic and the non-dramatic author each take the defensive precaution of suggesting that it is a congenital disease of the other, their two suggestions may be written off as cancelling each other. So far, then, we reach nothing of any value.

May we also dismiss pretty quickly some other applications of the word "literary" to faulty dramatic writing? They are applications which, though they do have a certain measure of rightness, do not go very deep. I mean, they do not raise any point of fundamental and irreconcilable difference between dramatic and non-dramatic writing. It is obvious, for example, that the method of unfolding the course of a plot must in some ways be different in a play meant for acting and in a book meant for reading. It is not that

there is any profound or mystic difference between ideas taken in through the eye and ideas taken in through the ear. Many of us would say that all written things are, in a sense, taken in through the ear, and that, when one reads rightly, one imaginatively hears every sentence and does not merely see it, as if the printed sentence were a drawing. At any rate, there is no sharp dividing line between drama as a thing for the ear and other literary art as a thing for the eye, for then where should we place the Book of Job, or the words of "Auld Lang Syne", or a volume of Burke's speeches? But still there is the quite real, though not very profound, truth, that when you are reading a novel you can always turn back to an earlier page if you are in doubt and want to look something up, and that when you are watching a play you cannot do this. And so a dramatist has to practise in every part of a play a more independent, self-contained lucidity than is absolutely necessary for a novelist—though, of course, it is no virtue in a novelist, either, to keep you always clearing up his obscurities by reference to what he said before. And if a dramatist does fail in this way it may sometimes be convenient, though not very scientific, to use the word "literary", with inverted commas round it, to indicate the mistake.



It is often said, again, that the state of mind, or the capacity for emotion, of a spectator in a theatre is different from that of a solitary reader; that in various ways he is so strongly affected by consciousness of the presence of many other persons, and by the visible or audible effect of a play upon them, that he becomes almost a different being from what he was in his study; that he is now differently appealed to by

the same work of art; and that, to be appealed to now in the same way as he was in the study, his mind must receive a different kind of stimulus from an author. Well, there is a fine assertive air of psychological depth about all that. I am tempted to think it is only a rather elaborate way of saying that if you see other people laughing or crying it prompts you to laugh or cry too, so that it sometimes serves a dramatist's turn to make all his appeals a little cheaper than, say, a novelist's, because if he can once set the mass of commonplace or uncritical spectators laughing or crying he may be able, through their tears or laughter, to work a little on the more fastidious and exacting spectator also. If and so far as that is so, of course a dramatist would make a mistake if he sighted his rifle, so to speak, for the wrong range and offered his matter to an audience in a form which did not make any necessary allowances for the mental optics and acoustics of the theatre. And if any one chooses to use the word "literary", in a secondary sense, to denote that sort of technical clumsiness, I do not know that there is any serious objection to the use, so long as he does not pretend to be speaking philosophically. Only, as before, it is quite an arbitrary, superficial use; it arises from no principle or distinction of first-rate interest.

Again, there is another fairly obvious precaution that the writer of a play meant for acting should take. He has to do what is sometimes called in the trade "getting out of the way of the acting". As a rule, when a scene acts well, it is not that the actors express over again in a pantomime just what the author expresses in his words. That would give an effect of overacting, but it is just as likely, in such cases, that

the author has overwritten as that the actors are overacting. What the more skilful dramatist consciously does is to divide the opportunities for expressiveness between his actors and himself. Of all the things that he would set down on paper if he were writing a piece of dialogue simply to be read, as in a novel, he will leave a large proportion out, in order that the actor may have those significances to convey in his own way. As Mr. Grundy puts it, "the author must deliberately leave openings, gaps, chasms; unlike the carpenter, he must never 'join his flats' ". When this mapping out of the relative shares in the final accomplishment of the acted play has been adroitly done, the mere text of the play will often look scrappy and disjointed and obscure to a reader who does not bring to it the special theatrical imagination. When *Hedda Gabler* was first read and seen acted in England, a very capable literary critic candidly said that when he read it he could not make out what it all meant, but when he saw it on the stage it was as clear as crystal. One can hardly imagine a revolution of that completeness brought about in an educated person's mind by the first sight of a performance of a play by Tennyson or Browning. What happens in this case is rather that what was fully expressed in the bare text seems to labour its own clearness on the stage; you are troubled with a confused sense of over-elucidation, of a plethora of means taken to an end that your mind has attained already. When a theatre manager reads a new play and finds in it this lack of provision for the actor's share in the joint work, he may naturally say to himself that here is some precious literary man trying to write plays without knowing the game, and he may briefly describe such

plays as "literary plays", and nobody need mind his doing so, so long as we remember that here again the definition does not go very deep. It only means that some writer has not conformed to the conditions imposed by a particular kind of writing. That is to say, it means some literary person has not been literary enough.

Take one more instance of a partly differentiating quality in strictly dramatic writing. People often speak of the necessary terseness and compactness of plays as compared with narrative fiction, and of course this is true so far as an average play contains about one-fifth of the number of words in an average novel. But the effect, the impression on a hearer, of a tense, exacting terseness is one to be specially avoided in the greater part of any long composition which is to be taken in through the ear. It is an old observation that in skilful oratory there is practised the use of many verbal repetitions or approaches to repetition, certain little diffusenesses and otiosenesses that would almost be felonies in the writer of an essay or of a short poem. No unbroken flow of quite close argument could be followed by the average hearer's mind; and since the flow of sound is expected to be continuous, the essential and significant parts of the speech have to be spaced out with unessentialities, with what are really disguised blanks, simply as breathing-spaces for the audience's attention. Fox and Bright, in both of whom the technical mastery of oratory seems to me indistinguishable from sheer perfection, both used to diversify the most impassioned or the most severely argued parts of their speeches with passages in which you might accuse them of almost infantine redundancy

and tautology if you did not allow for their technical purpose. And so, in a shrewd man of the theatre like Ibsen, you find scenes of the most concentrated dialogue diluted with idle-looking little trivialities, perhaps about cigarettes or coffee, odds and ends that may look futile and superfluous when you only read them in the text. And, on the other hand, when a too-drastically compressed play like Mr. Stephen Phillips's *Paolo and Francesca* is acted, the want of such moments of lessened demand upon your intentness is apt to make itself curiously felt; you have a sensation that passages of much beauty and importance are constantly slipping past you before you can fairly grasp them; it feels like rowing against a very fast stream, when each stroke is over before your oar can get a good hold of the water. And this, perhaps, is because the author has not thought of each of his most ambitious passages, with its special call for attention, as something that the mind should approach relatively a little vacant or at ease, and should also have a moment to dwell upon afterwards, before passing to complete absorption in the next very fine thing. Such a dramatist seems to have tried for an even, unbroken richness and intensity of significance, like that of *Lycidas* or of an ode of Keats, and would not submit to the special conditions of the theatre and the platform, which force dramatists and orators to work their gold, like jewellers, with some alloy in it. And if anyone chooses to describe as "literary" the neglect of this technical requirement by a dramatic writer, of course he is free to do so. We can see how he comes at his use of the word. Only, like those other uses before, it is a use somewhat secondary, superficial, arbitrary. No more than those others does

it show us the way to the very centre and essence of the supposed antagonism, and even mutual exclusion, of literary quality in the strict sense and dramatic quality in the strict sense.

To see in how extreme a form that antagonism has been affirmed, one may go back to Traill's statement of the case. He asserted, in these words, "that the right sort of handling for the study must of necessity be—cannot of its very nature help being—the wrong sort of handling for the stage; that in not a single dramatist after the Greeks"—whom Traill regarded as forming a case apart—"is there any fusion of the literary and dramatic elements, but only the superposition of one upon the other; not one of them proves anything more than that you can 'butter' a drama with literature, just as you might hang a picture over a fresco, to the concealment of the latter in a measure exactly proportioned to the display of the former". Traill endeavoured to show that though in Shakespeare there was often a juxtaposition of fine literature and fine drama, there was never a real welding of them into one, but only the intrusion of poetry, "impressive enough as literature, but, dramatically speaking, quite irrelevant", into what are otherwise good acting plays. He took as a typical case the scene after the murder in *Macbeth*. First there is an exchange of hurried, shuddering little questions and answers that are gasped out by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth when he comes out to her after murdering Duncan, beginning with Macbeth's saying:

> I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?

Then follow seven speeches, each, on an average, less than four words long. Traill imagines *Macbeth*

coming on offer now as a new play by an unknown dramatist to a competent manager of a theatre. The manager reads through these speeches and says, "Capital, capital. That ought to fetch them. 'Beget an awful attention in the audience', eh? like the clock striking in *The Critic*. But I say, I say, what's all this?



> "Macbeth does murder sleep,"—the innocent sleep,
> Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
> The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
> Chief nourisher in life's feast,—

And when Lady Macbeth says, "What do you mean?" the manager says, "What indeed? You may well ask, my Lady. It's all very good stuff in its way, I dare say, but this is not the place for it. It's unnatural; it delays the action. It must come out, my boy. Sorry to hurt your feelings, but it must come out." And Traill asks, Would not the manager have been right? For, he says, "the passage is great literature, but is it great drama?" And he applies the same critical measure to the Queen Mab speech, and to the seven-ages-of-man speech, and other admired passages of Shakespeare, and comes in each case to the same conclusion.

Well, that contention seems to invite two lines of comment. One—I am not going to dwell on it here—is to dispute Traill's theory that these longer speeches are undramatic at all, and with it to dispute his implied theory that all drama must be not only an affair of action, but an affair of physical action so rapid as to make sustained speech unnatural during its course. Dryden knew better than that when he

said that in a play "every alteration or crossing of a design, every new-sprung passion, and turn of it, is a part of the action, and much the noblest, except we conceive nothing to be action till the players come to blows". Maeterlinck goes further still along Dryden's line of thought when he finds the matter of drama in "an old man, seated in his arm-chair, waiting patiently with his lamp beside him, giving unconscious ear to all the eternal laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of door and window and the quivering voice of the light, submitting with bent head to the presence of his soul and his destiny"—Maeterlinck finds there the matter of drama more abundantly than in "the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who conquers in battle or the husband who avenges his honour". Even if we do not agree with all that, still it is arguable that the delivery of Macbeth's "To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow" speech, or of Prospero's "insubstantial pageant faded" speech, gives us a moment of dramatic action as authentic as the stabbing of Caesar or the smothering of Desdemona. It is only that in the one case the dramatic action is more wholly in the visible soul of Macbeth or Prospero, and that in the other it is rather less wholly in the souls of Othello, Brutus, Cassius and the rest. I do not say that all Shakespeare's great outbursts of poetry are strictly relevant, dramatically, but the contention that they are mere interpolations which have no dramatic value, either by way of furthering the action of the scenes where they occur, or of giving some atmosphere which the scenes require—this contention certainly does not seem unanswerable.

Even if it were, there would still be an answer to the other and more fundamental part of Traill's theory—I mean, his assumption that the other kind of dramatic dialogue, the rapid bandying of short speeches in single lines, half-lines or abrupt, jagged utterances of one or two words, all much mixed and kneaded up with visible action, is not literature. What is it, then? The theory seems to imply that effective dramatic dialogue must of its nature be some sort of mechanical transcript from something postulated as "real life"; for we are asked what there is in common between literature and the "bald, disjointed chat" which is the language of "real life", as if drama must necessarily be a machine-made copy of that disjointed chat, while poetry and prose fiction are necessarily or normally something else. But, if that were so, how could it come about that this same bald chat emerges as totally different things from the copying-machines of, say, Sir Arthur Pinero, Mr. Galsworthy, J. M. Synge, Mr. H. A. Jones and Mr. Shaw, even in those scenes of each of them in which they are most intent on giving the effect of close veracity or of headlong rapidity, and are most severely eschewing any kind of literary surplusage? It seems natural to assume that what is so easily referred to as "real life", as if it were something compact and legible, given to a dramatist to copy out, really presents itself to him, more or less definitely, as an enormous field for selection. You remember Pater's description of the process, or act, of literary creation. "Into the mind sensitive to 'form', a flood of random sounds, colours, incidents, is ever penetrating from the world without, to become, by sympathetic selection, a part of its very structure, and, in

turn, the visible vesture and expression of that other world it sees so steadily within, nay, already with a partial conformity thereto, to be refined, enlarged, corrected, at a hundred points; and it is just there, just at those doubtful points, that the function of style, as tact or taste, intervenes." Even where a dramatist's dialogue seems to be stripped of all removable literary ornament he is still, indeed he may be all the more intently, selecting the verbal remnant that survives. Where he is most telegraphic in his ellipses, there only goes on the more ardently the consideration of what to leave out—and, after all, the making of a statue is only a matter of leaving out all the stone except a certain selected remnant. One may take an illustration from a skilful modern prose play, the *Iris* of Sir Arthur Pinero. The hero, at its tragic climax, refuses to forgive the failure of the heroine; he meets all her entreaties with the mere repetition of the words, "I'm sorry" and "I'm very sorry". It is easy to say that "I'm very sorry" is not literature; but why may it not be? If you take the words "I'm dying" by themselves you might say they were not literature, but put them in the right context, shed the right atmosphere round them, and hear them repeated over and over again by Antony to Cleopatra, and they become the very rose of literature. And when Pinero's little scrap of "I'm very sorry" has come to be where it is by being successively preferred to each of the hundred other things he might have put in its place, it is arguable that its very jejuneness has a literary value attested by that preference. It may be somewhat bald itself, but it carries about it the hairy scalps of a good many victims of its prowess.

In the plays of Mr. Galsworthy you find some of the most severely cut-down dialogue that is now written by any English dramatist of note; every phrase, every word, has been strained through the most severe and exacting of sieves. People will sometimes talk of such dialogue as "photographic", meaning that the things said in it are just such things as living people in such positions might say, and forgetting that they are only some minute fraction of all the things that such people might say, and not noticing that what these objectors call a camera has performed the very un-camera-like feat of isolating, from the multitude of objects presented to it, the few that are most fit not only to advance the action of a special plot and to exhibit certain traits in particular characters, but also to prompt in an audience's mind a special vein of semi-conscious comment or a special mood of reverie about certain general ideas. The "real life", which a dramatist like Mr. Galsworthy is sometimes supposed merely to take as he finds it, and to give out as he takes it, does just about as much to help him as a piano-manufacturer does for a composer. It gives him every note he wants; he has only, it may be said, to take the notes he sees fit and put them in an order. But it certainly does not need less craft cunning, or a less profoundly felt emotion, to string together a few tags and shreds of ready-made cockney speech into the police-court scene of *The Silver Box* than it takes to string a few ready-made notes into the tune of a fine song.

Even to put it in that way is to make too great a concession, for I used the word "ready-made", and a dramatist does not find even small fragments of his work ready made for him by real life before he

begins. If ever he thought he had found such a fragment; if, say, he noticed some authentic utterance of passion in the mouth of a friend, and simply reported it in his next play, he would probably achieve an effect of falsity to nature. In one of Stevenson's letters to Mr. Barrie he says of a character in a novel of Mr. Barrie's: "Thomas affects me as a lie. I beg your pardon: doubtless he was somebody you knew; that leads people so far astray. The actual is not the true." I suppose it is the stage's high power of illusion that can prevent some educated playgoers from seeing that this is at least as true of plays as of novels. When you see a kitchen-table standing on a stage, and looking like the most real and ready-made of kitchen-tables, it is difficult to believe that in order to look so real it has had to have two inches taken off two of its legs. And so when a thing said in a play has an air of close and literal veracity, people find it hard to believe that this effect of truth could only be achieved through much deliberate departure from truth in the narrower sense of the word. For one thing the speech of a character in a play, as in a novel, has to be what his speech in real life is trying to be; the thwarted semi-expressiveness of actual speech has to be helped to attain completeness, if only the ironical completeness of total incoherency; everything highly individual, that is striving more or less unsuccessfully to assert itself in real life, must, in a play, be given its full rights. It is almost exactly what happens in portrait-painting, where a painter discards many trivial points of exactness, in order to heighten the truthfulness of a few fundamentals; he makes the sitter, in a sense, more like himself, more expressive of the very essence of himself, than he actually is at

any such single moment as a photograph might capture; and so, even in the most rapid dialogue, a dramatist who knows his business will be pursuing the bigger truths of characterisation by means of a multitude of departures from such truth as there is in mere verbal mimicry.

All the time, too, he will be keeping on good terms with the spectator's ear, through which his written work must ask for admission, and, to this end, even when he seems to be most headlong, he will still overhaul and amend the bumping and jolting movement of actual speech. If you examine the most rugged-seeming of prose dialogue, the kind of dialogue that people sometimes praise as "simply a page torn from the book of life", and so on, you find speeches tripping to craftily contrived rhythmic measures—some, it is true, devised to suggest, though they do not reproduce, special traits of inflection or intonation in the persons represented, but others simply designed to conciliate and absorb the playgoer's melody-seeking ear. When Synge, in his Irish plays, tries hardest to express some primitive rudeness of thought or emotion in one of his peasants he becomes only more cunningly rhythmical than before, just as Mr. Rudyard Kipling, when he wants to express through dialogue the barbaric chivalry of Indian border tribesmen, has more and more recourse to the technique of the classic ballads of the Scottish border, their rhythms and refrains and assonances and alliterations. In Henley and Stevenson's *Beau Austin*, where the girl Dorothy is entreating her brother not to fight a duel with her lover, an effect of impassioned spontaneity is achieved through a craftily wrought simplicity of melody. She says in one place:

"Anthony, I have tried to be a good sister; I brought you up, dear, nursed you when you were sick, fought for you, loved you. Think of it, think of the dear past, think of our own home and the happy winter nights, the castles in the fire, the long shining future, the love that was to forgive and suffer always."

All that is as carefully constructed as the prose harmonies of the English Prayer Book, and though it conveys to our minds an idea of troubled importunity, it is as remote from mere reproduction of the exact form of any real entreaty that ever was uttered as the lovely General Confession in the Morning Service, with its little calculated repetitions, its clusters of alliterative words, and its beautiful and noble cadences, is remote from any cry of contrition that ever came impromptu from a human being. If these means to effect be literary, then the qualified dramatists become all the more literary the more they desire to express the freshness and momentariness of intense life.

That the theatre itself and not merely literary criticism demands this of them is shown in an incident narrated by Sarcey in 1881. Sarah Bernhardt had just been acting Marguerite in *La Dame aux Camélias*, and Sarcey noticed that in Marguerite's description, in the third Act, of her country life with Armand, Bernhardt left out a whole clause in one sentence and cut off four words, not absolutely required by the sense, at the end of another. He asked her why she did this, and she said she had tried to make the speech sound right as Dumas had written it, but had found that the clause in question had deadened its gait; she could not make it run or flow, and by leaving out the other four words she had found she could close the sentence with a cadence more engaging to the ear and

more apt to the rather elusive kind of plaintiveness animating the speech. Then she repeated the speech to him in each of the two forms in turn, and Sarcey felt no doubt that she was right. "Of course", he says, "it was only quite a small detail, and might be thought a mere question for the elocutionists. But what a light did I find that this simple observation, let fall by an artist who does not trouble about the philosophy of things, but just obeys the dim promptings of instinct, threw on the style of writing proper to the theatre." Certainly no one who has read Madame Bernhardt's memoirs could think of her as a "literary" critic of anything: it was simply her keen perception of strictly theatrical values that had shown her that even those dramatic speeches which are to seem the most unpremeditated expressions of a fugitive emotion have to be fashioned, almost syllable by syllable, as Milton elaborated the rich and curious inlayings and jewellings of *L' Allegro*.

In that very passage which Traill took as an example of the non-literary or anti-literary character of dramatic excellence—the little snatch of haggard and aghast dialogue between Macbeth and his wife after the murder—Macbeth asks whether she had not heard a noise, and she answers.

"I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry."

Well, I wonder would most people call that line an unselective copy of the bald chat of real life. To me it seems as if all Shakespeare were in it; each word, each letter almost, in those croaking or skirling recurrent chords of harsh consonants, with which a great actress would thrill your ear, was surely the result of a very passion of refining and perfecting fidelity to

Shakespeare's individual sense of romantic horror. You can imagine him, when he had got it right, throwing down the pen and saying, like Thackeray, "By God, that's a masterpiece!" not because he had achieved a piece of lifelikeness, or forged what might pass as a recorded utterance of an eleventh-century Scottish peeress in a moment of excitement, but because he had transmuted this into so glorious an indirect expression of his own emotions about her plight. For just as certainly as in Sterne or Dr. Johnson or Carlyle, or any of the most voluble literary exponents of their own temperaments, so do you find craftsmanship, even in the most strictly dramatic writing, ruled by the ordinary conditions of literary art and every other art, and achieving excellence or failure in proportion to the measure in which it reflects its author's personality and his vision of life as a whole, as well as his particular sense of texture and colour in language —and also, of course, in proportion to the richness or meagreness of the personality that there is to reflect.

One is even tempted to float a paradox and to say that in some ways a perfect play is not only literary, but more literary than most of the other forms of literature. We know the engaging Aristotelian idea of art as always trying to disengage itself from its own medium, to convert, as Aristotle would say, all its matter into form, the painter or sculptor always reducing and reducing the proportion of inorganic or inexpressive paint or marble, the writer liberating his significance from more and more of the weight of inexpressive wording which always seems in a sense to be disabling the writer's intention, preventing his communicated thought from being all that it has it in it to be. Of course it is only one of two opposite, or

apparently opposite, ways of looking at the same thing, the other way being to regard his medium as his delight and support, a means or mode of thought and a spur to his imagination. Still, that idea of words as a clogging or resisting force, which the writer has to war down as far as he can, is a luminous one; and, viewed in the light of this idea, what a sensation of released and increased power must the use of the dramatic form give to any literary artist who has mastered it—a form in which every unit of his medium, every word he uses, is raised to a new range of significance, is made more organic, by the added values it receives when delivered on a stage. There, thanks to the backing of illuminative action, gesture and scenery, every word may go enormously further than anywhere else; much of the routine business of imaginative writing is altogether remitted; the artist is free to concentrate on distilling the essence of an essence, re-selecting and re-refining the few most richly expressive parts of what is left at the point where a novelist's labours of selection and refinement end. Certainly I know of nothing in non-dramatic literature where, in Aristotle's sense, all matter seems to have been so taken up into form as in some of the great passages of intense emotion and rapid action in plays, such as the scene before the death of Desdemona.

Well, now to collect what I can from these memoranda. Plays seem to be currently called literary in the sense either that they are written well or that they are written badly. Those *condemned* as literary may, again, be subdivided into those that are specially ill-written for stage presentation and those that are bookishly ill-written altogether. Thus Shelley's plays, in spite of their great qualities, are ill-written for the

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stage; and a play like Tom Taylor's *Still Waters Run Deep*, in spite of a certain aptness for the stage, has been condemned as literary because its characters speak the fustian of pretentious books. And, again, the plays that are *commended* as literary may be subdivided into those that are felt to be specially well written for the stage and those that, while they contrive to exist on the stage, also satisfy critics of Mr. Saintsbury's way of thinking that they are worthy of a higher life as bound books. So that a "literary" play may mean a play wholly bad to read and to see, or a play wholly good to read and to see, or a play good to read but bad to see, or even a play bad to read but not quite bad to see. In fact there is no kind of good or bad play that you may not either praise or condemn as literary, with some special accent of contempt or enthusiasm on the word. And this confusion, or much of it, seems to come of a loose way of speaking of literary and dramatic as terms necessarily opposite and exclusive, whereas the distinction between them is one of those distinctions that seem very real when you think lazily, but diminish and diminish until they almost vanish when you think more vigorously. It is like the distinction between knowing a thing theoretically and knowing it practically; we all use that sort of phrase and take for granted in a slipshod way that theory and practice are a kind of natural opposites; but I suppose a careful thinker would tell us that if you know a thing theoretically but don't know it practically, then you really don't know its whole theory; and if you know it practically, but don't know it theoretically, then you don't really know its whole practice; the nearer theoretical knowledge of a thing, in the full sense, comes to perfection, the nearer does it come to

identity with practical knowledge of it; and the more complete a practical knowledge of it grows, the less is it distinguishable from knowledge of its theory. Such, almost exactly, is the distinction between literary and dramatic quality in a play. If one's own conception of literary quality and of dramatic quality be confused and shallow, the distinction is a gaping wide one. If by literary quality you mean bookishness, and by dramatic quality you mean staginess, the antithesis between them may easily be striking. But in proportion as one examines and defines more exactly one's own conception of literary excellence on one side and of dramatic excellence on the other, one finds the assumed contrast and antagonism to be fading away into nothing. Just as knowledge of the theory of a thing almost ceases to be distinguishable from knowledge of its practice so soon as we begin really to mean "knowledge" when we say it, and not merely semi-knowledge, so literary merit and dramatic merit may cease to seem to us to be in conflict at all if we can only clear our own minds of the last trace of slovenly thinking about them.

*Too True to be Good!*

# TOO TRUE TO BE GOOD!

## I

It was the custom of one of the greatest of races to carry its invalids down to the street, on their beds, so that anyone who passed by might look the sufferers over and say what he thought would be good for them. The notion was that in this way any non-professional medical genius running wild in the town would soon be roped in, to the benefit of the case. About the percentage of cures effected no word remains. But some of the patients may have survived for a time.

We have reason to hope so. For this is one of our favourite ways of doctoring the arts—painting, the theatre, literature, any art will do. First we say it is sick unto death. The poor art itself may assert that it never felt better. But we deal firmly with any hallucination like that. We strap it down on a bed, place the bed on a good open site in Fleet Street or near Covent Garden, and then invite everybody who does not practise this particular art to feel its pulse and look at its tongue and say what pill he would give.

Of course there is never complete agreement between these wayside practitioners. But now and then a sort of common drift sets in, even in these artless minds, and a fairly general cry arises that some art, or a whole group of arts, is afflicted with some definite and highly dangerous species of collywobbles from which salvation is only to be had by following a

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certain drastic course of treatment. For some little time we have had in our ears one of these little choruses. It assures us that more arts than one are ailing from excess of mimicry. They represent people and things with an insalutary fidelity. Portraits are adjudged "deplorably like", and all the sting of the phrase is meant for the painter, not the sitter. A landscape is said to be "too true to be good". A statue of Pan may be forgiven for resembling Queen Victoria, but not for being mistakable for Pan. If it is to resemble the god without discredit, it ought to offer itself as a figure of Boadicea or of Industrial Welfare. For then no detractor would say that the artist had squandered his power on the coolie-work of a copyist when he should have been heading dead straight for the big aesthetic valuables.

To put it no higher, this new line of comment would have supplied any quantity of munitions to people who make solemn talk about art and are the natural prey of the artists of *Punch*. But the major fun of the business is that the new wisdom has got beyond crying aloud in the streets. It has poked into studios. A few, at least, of the preachers have gallantly given their proofs—have painted portraits in which the expression of their deepest selves is unsmirched by any recognisable aping of the exterior of anyone else, or even of the general physique of the race. Those deepest selves have not always been readily discernible, either. Still, we have it on their own word, spoken or written, that they have sung, danced, mused, tripped and brooded in paint, and that they have carried out in it vast structural ideas. Beyond dispute they have painted that which eye hath not seen.

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But the scope of a vast thought like this is not to be limited to any one art. The vice of so representing persons or things that they can be identified by any untutored eyes has not confined its ravages to painting and sculpture. Your fallen artist will slavishly try to make you suppose that it is really Autumn or Mr. Baldwin or Mrs. Wertheimer that has inspired his toils. But actors are as bad. They will shamelessly do to the life some humped, usurping Richard or fat and white-headed Falstaff. Why not abandon all this deadening drudgery? Why pretend to be Wolsey with mediaeval London about you, or Shylock with mediaeval Venice instead? Why not simply come on the stage, without any of these shallow pretences, and give your audience the essence of the matter—just shed around you the brilliance and charm of your genius, unalloyed with any paltry make-believe? If you be made of the right air and fire for the job, what need have you of such illusory dross as sables, ermine, cups of sack and Jewish gaberdines? Away with all this mechanical assimilation to hook-nosed Caesars and mulberry-nosed Bardolphs. Dramatic art, like other divinities, is a spirit and must be worshipped in the spirit and in truth: let the actor be wholly sincere and original, like a thrush singing or like a child dancing for joy.

Then comes poetry's turn. Too long, we are told, have the poets wasted their strength on such copyist stuff as the Vergilian and Tennysonian representations of landscape—mere trick-work, like metre and rhyme, those obsolete implements of the conventional copy-cats of all ages. High time for poets to pour out

their souls as they come and to hit us direct—not by ricochetting off some laborious description of an old Greek urn or of Autumn standing by a wine-press. The art of prose fiction has not yet felt the full weight of the reforming hand. But its case is not seriously different from those of the other offenders. If Hugo or Mr. Hardy, brooding over the life and death of some Gauvain or Jude, has been memorably moved, hadn't he better impart his grand emotion itself, and at once, and not spend some tens or hundreds of thousands of words in working out a kind of effigy of this worthy's career? "Cut the cackle and come to the 'osses": give us the laughter or tears without all these heavily wrought simulacra of bulky portions of life.

3

You may feel that this is absurd. So do I. And yet it has a core of rightness. Its absurdity is only the absurdity of all extreme over-statement.

For it is perfectly true that in any great work of art the element of close and literal representation of something outside the mind of the artist is relatively small. As was said by Balzac, the business of art is not to copy nature but to express her. Countless works of art are dull and poor because their authors have not got beyond mere circumstantial reproduction of the physical appearance of the details of their subjects—"as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin and so forth". Many pictures by artists of considerable skill are mere dead painted schedules of this sort.

Again, it is perfectly true that middling actors will

often miss the spirit of a part and take the life out of it by their over-absorption in trivial points of accuracy in the outward trappings of the man. Many novels, too, are wrecked on that shoal. For nothing short of an authentic passion for concrete detail, in the mind of the author himself, can give the saving gusto and animation which carry off safely the long inventories of utensils and articles of food and attire in Scott and Defoe. Anything that a competent artist loves well enough he can make lovable to any good reader. But love it must be, and the higher quality of the work, its power to move a fit spectator or reader, depends on the measure in which some free and vehement expression of this emotion of the artist's emerges out of the primary business of recalling certain external objects to the mind's eye.

So, with great caution and many reserves, you may perhaps divide the work of a writer or painter into two halves and call one higher and the other lower. Already I feel inclined, for my own part, to snatch back this concession, now that I have made it; so repugnant do I find it to allow that there is anything short of perfection in any part whatever of the divine self-indulgence of artistic construction. Still, let it stand: in a certain sense it is valid; it may give us a lift on the way to clear thinking if for the moment we think of the murder scene in *Othello* as being divisible into two elements: one of them a certain abstract tragic beauty, a splendid sombre emotion communicable from the author or the actor, or both, to an audience; the other a succession of efforts to call up before us veracious images of a bedroom, a bed, pillows, a lighted candle, a woman asleep, a man speaking to himself, making gestures and finally

attacking and killing the woman. I can comprehend, at any rate, the idea that the evocation of all these material images, the inventing of the furniture and the devising of appropriate bodily movements for Othello and for Desdemona, is a less exalted or a less exacting function of imaginative genius than it is to keep track of all the dark and swift movements of passion in the depths of their minds. But it is not so easy to think of these two functions as so completely separable in practice that either of them can be discharged to the greatest effect by an artist without his discharging the other at all. I try to think of that scene in *Othello* without a bed or pillows or a lighted candle or a dark-skinned face working passionately—of nothing but certain bodiless intensities of emotion. But nothing is left. It is as if I were told not to think of a beautiful eye, but of the beauty of that eye, to banish every visual image of the actual feature, in the flesh, and to fasten my whole mind upon some incorporeal essence of loveliness that is its but not it. I can't do it. Can anyone?

4

There seems to be a natural—or some would say, a scientific—distinction between two groups of arts.

On the one side are those arts which have the habit of representing either concrete things or persons or else concrete symbols or emblems of thoughts, emotions or events. Your painter represents the Pyramids or the Doge Loredano, or Autumn, or Hope, or the Crucifixion, or Alfred neglecting the cakes or the surrender of Calais or Breda. Your sculptor represents John Bright or Peter Pan or Mr. Carnegie,

or Famine, or Maternal Love, or Dawn, or Bacchus in drink or the snakes strangling Laocoön. Your actor represents a hunchbacked usurper brimming with venomous vitality, or a testy and generous dotard butting his head against some of the uglier facts of human nature. Your dramatist or novelist represents figures typical of frustrated ambition, or love, or of humbug unctuous or flamboyant. And in doing this they have almost always said or assumed that a recognisable faithfulness in the representation was their right aim. This conviction of theirs is recorded in scores of familiar passages. Actors are "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature". The good sculptor "would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape". His work is

> life, as lively mock'd as ever
> Still sleep mock'd death.

In the other group of arts are architecture, music and dancing. In these, as a rule, there is not a representation of something pre-existent, but a presentation of something new, the direct product and expression of some personal calculation or emotion, or both. A fine new town-hall or church is never an attempt to represent some other town-hall or cathedral. It may remind you of some Renaissance palace or Greek temple, but so far as it is a copy of one, a mere holder-up of a mirror, it is dull and void as a work of art. Resemblance to something older is not its aim or essence, but an accident or a defect. So, too, a fine piece of music or a fine dance does not, as a rule, excel in proportion to the fidelity with which it represents something concrete, some object of bodily sense. The typical masterpiece of music or

dancing attempts to present to us some emotion of the artist's quite directly and without any incidental imitation or representation of anything outside him, just as the best architect seeks to present, as directly and simply as he can, the comeliest possible fulfilment of certain practical requirements.

5

So broad a distinction as this is not to be whittled away by showing that some distinguished practitioner or other of one of the representative arts has cut down a good deal the representative element in his work. Whistler did so in many of his pictures. His "Cremorne" made little attempt at likeness to anything that was commonly known at the time by that name. A good many poets have tried to represent people, places or things, with their forms and colours half effaced by a twilight vagueness. The blurred outlines of Mr. Yeats may be placed in contrast with the laboured lucidity, the sharp-edged particularity of the representation of modern Rome in Zola's novel of that name. Perhaps you may say that in Turner's "Rain, Steam and Speed" the railway engine is not represented in the sense in which contemporary dress is represented in Frith's "Derby Day". So, too, on the other side, there have been pieces of music that try, in some slight degree, to represent the sounds of warfare or of village life or the voices of a farm-yard. And occasionally a dance, like Pavlova's dance of the Dying Swan, has attempted some little measure of visible representation of movements previous to its own. But such works are commonly felt by sensitive people to stand lower

than the masterpieces of their several arts. Any strong critical instinct recognises in them something of the freak, the *tour de force*, the astonishingly clever attempt to achieve something that cannot wholly be done or that is not worth doing. And so they only fortify the broad distinction between the essentially representative and the essentially presentative arts, the arts in which an artist expresses himself in relation to some specific objects or incidents outside him, and the arts in which he expresses himself without this restriction—or without this aid, as you may prefer to call it.

## 6

Passing fits of disregard for such distinctions, or of mutiny against them, are characteristic of periods of relative sterility and depression in art. Every art, at its best, is immovably sane. It may hang out any number of wild-looking flags of fantasy, but it hangs them out from the battlements of the fortress of reason. It has an English sense of evidence, the moderation of Greece and the common sense of Molière. And, as long as it is in health and the world not against it, it practises these bourgeois virtues not as a matter of painful submission to a necessary discipline, but just for the joy of the thing. For it has a good hold on the great secret of life—it can see the shining novelty of old things and feel the thrill that there is in commonplaces: it finds common sense exciting and it sticks to middle courses with a delighted consciousness of keeping a precarious and vital balance, like a man walking on high on a tight rope. You feel it all in Horace's essay on poetry and in Dryden's upon the writing of plays. Such men,

writing with the exhilaration of a great creative period in their minds, do not feel any need of paradox, of startling novelty or of any sort of sensational forcing of notes or loosing of waters. The ordinary thing is too deliciously intoxicant for that.

But there come other ages. A Peloponnesian or a European War lays its blight on whole peoples, deranges their life, upsets their standards of judgement and lowers their spirits. It interrupts and corrupts the education of their young. As customers of art it wears their nerves and deadens their palates so much that they tend to turn from the diet of health: they find it insipid and cry out for sharper sauces and more spice; they want to be titillated with something novel, flamboyant and sensational, something that, anyhow, nobody could have thought first rate long ago. Hence many unlucky adventures in letters and art since the Great War—the laboured unreserve of aphrodisiac novels and plays, the laboured unmelodiousness of much minor verse, the laboured rebellion of many minor painters and sculptors against the nature of their medium and the experience and tradition of their arts. Whenever the wellsprings of an art run a little dry, and the choric spheres grow rather husky, there is apt to be this kind of nervous and noisy running to and fro in quest of some new recipe that will enable a middling or tired performer to outshine Garrick and Goldsmith and Reynolds. Commonly it is one of the guiding principles of this search that any important generalisation or deep distinction hitherto accepted by the chief practitioners of the art concerned shall be treated as false. And in this way it comes to be said by many vivacious persons that a portrait should

not resemble a particular person any more than a symphony does, and that an actor or a novelist should no more give you a character "done to the life" than a dancer should dance an impersonation of somebody else.

You cannot usefully argue against such a doctrine. It would become serious only if there were any notable exception to the creative impotence which prevails where the doctrine is accepted. We have already waited ten years since the war for signs of any considerable new outburst of creative power in any art, and also for any outburst of the greater sort of criticism —the sort that can raise obvious facts from the dead and make an old bit of veracity flash like a jewel. So far we seem to be about as likely to see a boom in the cotton trade or a mad rush to buy shares in railways.

These wonders may come yet. And so may another heyday for the arts. Painting, poetry, fiction, the drama—all may yet pass right across the region of doldrums in which they are now flapping listless sails without enough way on them to steer in any special direction. And with the close of this long post-war interlude of immobility and middlingness there will also end a good deal of the barren theoretic talk with which slight facile thinkers have tried to shorten or to enliven the tedium of waiting. When the winds of the creative impulse are blowing great guns again no imaginative painter or writer will wait to discuss, with himself or anyone else, how far nature ought to be represented in the work that he does at her instance. He will do the work first—do it as his passion bids him—and then sit and listen, with a twinkle in his eye, to the buzz of all these intelligent midges.

*Too True to be Good!*

But why—that question remains—may we guess that the representative artist will go on representing? Simply because the delight of doing it is too great for him to forego. And the delight is so great because what we call representing is, to his sense, creating.

The Falstaff or Mrs. Gamp that we know may represent some knight or nurse known to Shakespeare or Dickens. But in that case what might have been mere copying was, at every turn, the creation of something wonderfully enhanced and supervitalised at the instance of something relatively commonplace. A Rembrandt portrait of some old Dutch woman represents that particular crone, but the representation is made a vehicle for the conveyance of enormously more than the obvious facts of her face; in it or through it there is created, among other things, a kind of beautiful and sombre descant on old age and human fortitude and dignity and individual loneliness. And yet representation and creation are so intermingled that the artist could not and would not distinguish them. Like the lover whose imagination makes a goddess of some commonplace young woman, the artist delights in keeping his creative work in close relation to the face and figure which suggested its inception. The expression of himself and the getting of a likeness to the sitter, or to the landscape before him, are not, to him, rival aims or requirements. Each appears to him as a condition of the attainment of the other; he prosecutes the two as one, and he is bewitched to find that each step towards either brings him nearer to both.

So it may very well be that in his off times, when

the creative impulse is weak and no subject fires him, an artist in paint or in letters will toy with the notion of not representing anything in particular, or of emitting his personality for our advantage without reference to one subject more than another. But let the hot fit come and he will hoot at the notion.

*Too True to be Good!*

*Matthew Arnold*

# MATTHEW ARNOLD

## I

WALKING with an elder brother in the streets of Oxford in my youth, I was struck by the looks of a tall oldish man with the shapeliest features, the stoop of a scholarly Jove, and an air of the most distinguished melancholy. "That's Matthew Arnold", my brother said when we had passed him. My heart had already told me that it was someone illustrious.

It was wet at the time; I could not kneel down on the Merton Street cobbles. Still, I turned round at the name and adored the Olympian back with all my eyes till it vanished round the corner of Oriel. For no italics, no capitals, not all the massed resources of typographical emphasis could tell you the fervour with which we swore by Arnold in those remote 'eighties, unless we were such as swore by the rival and comparatively sulphurous godhead of Swinburne. Was it not Arnold who in one famous and beautiful sentence of prose had doubled, to our sense, the beauty of our own Oxford, "whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the Middle Age"? And was it not he who had taught us the delicate fascination of doubt and the tremors, the thrills, the delicious venturings and flutterings of spiritual trouble?

Remember, Arnold flourished at a time when people of education had pretty well lived down the original shock and distress that were caused by the

first serious work of scholars on the Bible. The process, as someone had called it, of robbing millions of pious souls of their hope of eternal damnation had already entered on its second stage. It had almost ceased to be seismic or cyclonic. It was becoming more tranquilly detergent, erosive or decompository. And now, as promoted by Arnold, it had a sensuous beauty that charmed the young mind. Lit with the softened light of an imagination more tender and brooding than fiery, lustrous with the burnished older scholarship, twinkling with quiet ironies that seemed to take you ever so flatteringly into the confidence of a spirit august beyond words, the scepticism of Arnold had beautiful manners and entrancing tones. We are told that Ophelia could turn "Hell itself" to "favour and to prettiness". Arnold went one better and extracted those delights from the tragic decline of that institution.

The late George Russell, the last of great Whig wits, and himself a devoted High Churchman, told a friend that "Arnold's wish to believe, coupled with his inability to do so, was one of the most pathetic things I have ever known". The good Russell need not have grieved. Many men and women derive enjoyment from ill-health; but to the proper temperament a congenial complaint in the body is, as a source of agreeable emotions, nothing to a gentle malady of the soul. "Let us sit upon the ground", says the most human Richard the Second of Shakespeare, "and tell sad stories of the death of kings." Let us sit, says Matthew Arnold to himself, upon the window-seat of our hotel at Dover, and tell sad stories of the death of faith. And so he does, and writes the lovely lines of "Dover beach":

*Matthew Arnold*

Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in. . . .

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

And he enjoys himself immensely, as anybody would who was writing such good lines. And if anything had interrupted him while doing it, even the first trump of a new and completely reassuring revelation, he would have murmured, like Richard, "Beshrew thee, . . . which didst lead me forth From that sweet way I was in to despair". For no one is unhappy in the act of writing delightful things. Nature makes no mistake about that. She wants to have everything good and takes care that man, at any rate, shall have more pleasure than pain in carrying out this admirable purpose.

A writer will often tell you that this or that meritorious production of his has been written in agony. A classical case is Tennyson's saying in "In Memoriam" that the composing of it was a mere

mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

Don't believe him. Nothing so good as the good parts of "In Memoriam" was ever done like that. To say that it was is like Boswell's saying that he would suffer vexation if he were in Parliament and saw things going wrong. "That's cant, sir", said Johnson.

"Clear your *mind* of cant. You may *talk* as other people do: you may say to a man, 'Sir, I am your most humble servant'. You are *not* his most humble servant. You may say, 'These are bad times; it is a melancholy thing to be reserved to such times'. You don't mind the times. You tell a man 'I am sorry you had such bad weather the last day of your journey, and were so much wet'. You don't care sixpence whether he is wet or dry. You may *talk* in this manner; it is a mode of talking in society: but don't *think* foolishly." In Tennyson's and Arnold's age, and in the company they kept, there was a mode of talking as if artists of every sort ought to go about studded with visible and audible tokens that their heart was in their work and that every emotion to which they offered an expression was genuinely gnawing at their souls. In this way poor Irving, the great tragic actor, had to go about, all his life, with a manner and look that almost amounted to a suit of sables; Tennyson had to be always the mourner for Hallam, Browning the optimist, virilist sage, and Arnold the heartbroken outcast from the snug household of faith, wearying in spiritual wastes of sand and thorns. They all kept it up very well, and none better than Arnold. But it must have been, at bottom, just what Johnson called a mode of talking. When any one of them was working at his craft, at the top of his form, he must have been in ecstasy, as every other artist is, as Fra Angelico was when he painted a picture of Heaven and as Orcagna was when he painted a picture of Hell.

It was this ecstasy, too, and not merely certain charges of new theological explosives, made in Germany, that Arnold, in prose and in verse, could communicate to our minds. That was how he gave us

medicines, as Falstaff says, to make us love him. Under his winning conductorship there was intellectual luxury to be got out of tottering creeds and melting rigidities. Walter Pater, though his mind was travelling at the time in the direction opposite to Arnold's, had lately ventured to diagnose an exquisite fascination in states of decay—a faint and fine aroma as of immemorial oak panelling and fading tapestries. Arnold taught our adolescent senses to snuff up some such delectable fragrance among the fragments of the orthodoxy which he shattered for us with a grace and courtesy so remarkable. It is important, says Bacon, to have in your garden some plants of the sort that smell sweetest when trodden upon; Arnold filled our garden with a scent of nice crushed Fundamentalism in an age when that redoubtable word was yet unborn.



There was another suave chain that bound us to Arnold. I mention it with some diffidence in a much-altered world. We were notably serious, and Arnold's seriousness kept us in countenance. You may say there are always some serious young men. Yes, there are, even now. Some men are born to be serious, others achieve it, and others have it thrust upon them by economic and other forces. But seriousness was "the done thing" at the English universities in the 'eighties. It was the mode of the day. Carlyle had sown the seed; Browning had watered it; Ruskin had helped to give it increase. T. H. Green was dominating Oxford with a philosophy that escorted you straight to the life of good works and honest endeavour. Arnold Toynbee was founding a whole school of new social service. Rossetti, Watts, Burne-Jones, diverse in other ways, seemed to be wholly at one on the point that the cult of beauty was a most serious, if not an

anxious and mournful affair. So seriousness became the only wear. If you were of the kind that conforms, you soon decided that life was real, life was earnest, you took horse to hunt the Beautiful and Good with your young friends—just as persons of similar temperament are deciding to-day, with the Jolly Beggars of Burns, that "life is all a variorum: we regard not how it goes". Even the reprobated disciples of Swinburne practised their loyal little dissipations with some gravity. So Arnold was the very man for us—Arnold, with his "stream of tendency making for righteousness"; Arnold, who called all the world's poets up to be judged by their measure of "excellent seriousness" and ordered off the muse of Burns himself to the house of correction because of her shortage of this solid quality.

2

I never saw Arnold again. He died a year or two after. And presently I had to turn to and work—a novel experience—and found that work was a heavenly game and that everything was remarkably well with the world, so far as it dealt with me, though some of its other arrangements seemed to admit of improvement. In this Elysian condition I somehow lost the habit of reading my Arnold and gazing with a luscious melancholy at

> this strange disease of modern life,
> With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
> Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts.

I could not tell why. I could only suppose that, as Benedick said of his failure of relish for bachelorhood, a man loves the meat in his youth, that he cannot

endure in his age. But after a time I knew better, or thought so. For something was said which, as soon as I read it, I felt to be just the truth that I had been missing. *Matthew Arnold*

It was said by William Watson, the poet. Arnold had been buried close to the Thames, and Watson was praising the choice of that bland and composed country-side for the site of the grave in preference to the stern Cumberland hills, which the dead had loved too.

> Tis fittest thus! for though with skill
> He sang of beck and tarn and ghyll,
> The deep, authentic mountain-thrill
> Ne'er shook his page.
> Somewhat of worldling mingled still
> With bard and sage.

Yes, I said to myself; that was it. And perhaps it was just what had most charmed one's uncritical youth. For youth itself is apt to be worldly, unsure of its own presentableness, timid lest it be out of the swim and remote from the centre, wherever the centre may be. And Arnold had never failed, in one's youth, to give one that peace which the world *can* give—the restful sense of snuggling up close to a centre, of being taken right into a perfectly irreproachable "set". Oh! of course a most unmaterialist set; a set cultured up to the nines; a set as grandly free from mere gross common snobbishness as it had been from the raucous uncouthness of any poor "Philistines"—"outside our happy ground". But always a true set, elatingly exclusive, heart-warmingly superior. You felt, while you read, as if the right people had taken you up. In your glee at his majestic chaffing of spiritual boors and intellectual guys, of

the young lions of popular journalism and the grim ways of Black Countries and of crude reformers, you melted agreeably into a set which you felt to be supremely eligible. Of course you were no common intellectual climber, but still you had sensations distinctly allied to those of Thackeray and his Arthur Pendennis on coming to town and finding themselves securely elected to Brooks or to the Megatherium Club. You too were enormously "in it".

"Why not?" you may very well ask. "Has not the art of every considerable writer a core to be reached? And must not the joint quest of this heart of the rose become a conscious fellowship of souls in some sense or other elect? And what else is a set?"

And yet there is something more in it. I fancy it arises from a certain special tinting of Arnold's own consciousness while he wrote—a delicate suffusion of his genius with charity towards what is dominant in the polite lettered caste, the caste which has mastered the secret of making the things of the mind —a favourite phrase of its own—live at peace with what Burke calls the pomps and plausibilities of this world.

"But", you may object again, "was not Arnold the tireless critic of his country and his age, the lifelong arraigner of British limitedness and complacency, the crier of woe upon the darling mental vices of the principalities and powers of his world?"

Yes, he was quite a sincere and quite a good-sized Isaiah. And yet he wore the prophet's robe with a difference. He never let it look outlandish, as so many prophets have done, in the extravagance of their absorption in the primary business of saving

mankind. Arnold's camel-hair raiment was always extremely well cut and he ate his locusts and wild honey with conspicuous refinement. It seems to have been necessary that Moses should kill an Egyptian before he could lead Israel out of Egypt with adequate authority. But Arnold would never have killed an Egyptian—nor even a Philistine. He would have dined out with all the best people in Egypt or Philistia, appraised their flesh-pots with intelligence and delighted them with his vivacious conversation. As the adroit William Penn described—and possibly invented—by Macaulay found means to stand well at the court of the persecuting James the Second, so did Arnold keep in with the world he chid. It liked entertaining him and he must have given, in these polite exchanges, as good as he got, for he could be charming.



3

Long after I had first read that revelatory stanza of Sir William Watson's, Arnold's letters were published. And they, too, threw a light. For I found an unexpected resemblance between their effect on my mind and the effect of the extremely different letters of Dickens. You may remember the all but religious ecstasy that fired the pen of Dickens whenever he touched upon the remarkable satisfactoriness of the box-office receipts at his lectures. We all like money, unless we are fools, but greater love hath no man for money than glowed in those artless cries of the great heart of Dickens. In some of these letters of Arnold's I seemed to feel glowing—not indeed that ingenuous gusto of Dickens, but something distantly akin to it —a pure white gem-like flame of delight in knowing

all that was nicest in the great world of his days. No arrant tuft-hunting, of course; no downright stalking of lions, as lions; only something remotely related thereto, as the practice of Shakespeare's Old Gobbo was to actual rapine—"indeed, my father did something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of taste". Arnold was always a rather poor man, as things went at that time in England, though among French civil servants and poets he would have counted as rich. And "depend upon it, my boy", as Major Pendennis said to his nephew, "for a poor man there is nothing like having good acquaintances". Like many other men of high intellectual gifts, Arnold was ballasted with a just proportion of Major Pendennis's practical wisdom.

No shame to him, either. At any rate, he that has in him no grain of the staple alloys of this world, let him throw the first stone, for I am not throwing. I touch on the matter only by way of exploring the origin of a just perceptible flatness afflicting at times the fine bell-like voice which was engaged in crying "Woe!" here and "Woe!" there so engagingly and so often. People, especially very young ones, warn us to-day to keep out of the error of thinking that a man's life and his art have much to do with each other. And yet—so obstinate is nature, so careless of current critical fashions—there does somehow creep into R. L. Stevenson's elegant family prayers and handsome harangues on practice and on morals a very slight queerness of *timbre*. It may not amount to a positive crack in the soul-animating trumpet. It only goes far enough to commute the last thrill, the supreme dose of awe in our minds, for a sup of savoursome amusement as we think what manner of man this

moralist was in his life—how equally prone with us all to walk in the ways of his heart and in the sight of his eyes. Those who knew Thackeray in the flesh had consumed with the same piquant sauce the full meals of domestic virtue served up in his novels. And even those who had not known him, but still were sensitive readers, had been either tickled or put off, according to their several natures, by a certain still, small falsity of intonation that infests his celebrated commination services against the pomps and vanities of the great world. For the waters of moral elevation refuse, as flatly as do other waters, to rise higher than their source. No Stevenson can, by any elocutionary skill whatever, produce the authentic thunders of a Knox. And Arnold, too, had his appointed or acquired limits. He could never be tremendous. If he tried, you felt something was wrong, though you might not be able to say what it was till you read, long afterwards, one of his letters and thought to yourself that his were not the social valuations of the major prophets.



4

Within these limits set, perhaps, by a natural vein of timidity and by the best English upper-class education, what power he had! What beauty he commanded! And, in the main, how thoroughly he was on the right side! It is easy work to poke fun at his habit of crying up "sweetness and light"; but, after all, is there much to be said, on Europe's post-war experience, for the alternative cult of sourness and gloom? And if Arnold were not a distinguished Victorian, but a young author just rising above the horizon, what a refreshing spice of originality we

should find in his frank preoccupation with matters of conduct and in his unconventional preference for conduct that is reputable.

Our literary criticism now is passing through a lively little epidemic of inverted priggishness. In fiction the rather lecherous hero, the gallant young fellow who forges a cheque, the charming woman with several young children who commits adultery for some tenuous reason, are very much in the mode. And the critic who wants to be in the mode lays it down that on no excuse is an imaginative author to betray a warmer liking for straight livers than for scrubs or polecats. Now, "this sort of thing", as the attitudinising critic and poet says in the comic opera, "takes a deal of training". It is like pirouetting on tiptoe. It is not natural to man. The natural man quite simply and frankly prefers those bus-conductors who do not steal people's change to those who do. He has an unreasoned general liking for monogamic women and for the man who can keep a hold on himself. Scold him as you may, he feels an unaffectedly greater enjoyment in the company of people whom nobody would want to blackball at a club. He finds such company more interesting. When he tries to acquiesce in the fashionable theory that the words "good" and "bad", in the moral sense, are obsolete solecisms, he feels as if he were trying on an extremely tight boot. What a thrill he would get from any unconventional pioneer who let fashion go hang and said that conduct was three-fourths of life, that most of us spend the greater part of our time in thinking out what we ought to do in this or that case, and that literature is only losing the way and going off to dawdle in blind alleys when it ceases to take count of

the fact! Let him come to Arnold with a fresh mind, and that thrill will be his.

His, too, will be a liberal measure of poetry's most characteristic delight. What the great genius of Scott did for the Lowlands of his country, and that of Hardy for Wessex, that Arnold did, as De Wint did it in paint, for the southern English landscape of meadow, river, down and beach, with its contained and friendly amenity and the mild melancholy that becomes an heirloom of a countryside long settled and intensely humanised. His poems not only give this landscape reality; they give it a share of the transfigured, enchanted reality attained by the river gardens of Bagdad when a boy first sees them in the *Arabian Nights*. We are all heirs to the loveliness of the visible world, but only by process of art can we be inducted into possession of this large estate. Some authentic poet or artist has to intervene and give the property its rights and empower it to attain perfection in our sight. Whatever his limitations, Arnold was poet enough to do that to the country he knew. From the Cotswolds to Dover, England shines with an increase of beauty that is of his giving.

# *The Critic as Artist*

# THE CRITIC AS ARTIST

## I

"Yes, blame, blame, but praise? Oh, never!" In some such words a mild reprobate murmurs in one of Sir Arthur Pinero's plays, and a professional critic must sometimes feel likewise. Almost every current mention of his tribe has the cast of censure or of derision. "Criticism—Oh, that's easy," says the great musician. "Aren't the critics", the popular novelist will ask with an air of chaste aloofness from such cattle, "said to be the people who have failed at creating"? "Irresponsible, indolent reviewers," sings the poet. "Oh, a drink will square one of *them*," says theatrical Big Business chatting in the bar about the failure of critics to see the beauty of the revue which is pausing for the moment. A hopeless highbrow in the sight of the great public, he is rejected by real standard-bearers of culture as a half-baked mind or as a mercenary compromiser with the idols of the crowd.

"Men of all sorts", said Falstaff, "take a pride to gird at me." That is the poor critic's plight. Henry James excommunicated the dramatic critics of England for their failure to bring her playgoers to drink at the slightly opaque and brackish waters of Henrico-Jacobean drama. Almost at the same moment a distinguished actor complained that the critics were not searching enough, on points of acting technique—that they often praised an actor for some effect which was really quite easy to get, while they passed over,

unpraised, some other effect that "had required more study, more care, more intelligence". So it goes all round. The critic is too technical and he is not technical enough; he praises too lightly and he is a niggard of praise; he is in with a cabal of bloodless intellectuals and he kotows to the mob; he sniffs at all brave first-rate work by writers of parts and he is always sneering at the simple joys of the mentally humble. Almost every man's hand is against him.

> Whenever anything is missed — milk, coals, umbrellas, brandy—
> The cat's pitched into with a boot or anything that's handy.

As many people, apparently, cannot abide the harmless, necessary critic as the other animal of that description.

2

It is not hard to see why the actor or painter who knows his craft chafes so often against the critic who knows his. The person thus chafed has missed the point at the start. He takes it that the critic has tried to be what no critic has any business to be; and, naturally, he thinks that the critic has failed. Probably the actor or painter has in mind a kind of ideal critic, according to the actor's or painter's notions—some creature compact of full technical knowledge of the actor's or painter's art, perfect judicial balance, scientific precision in the assessment of technical merit, and also complete freedom from the natural ambition and egoism of an artist. Of such a person there may be a pattern laid up in Heaven, and there may even be a use for him there. But he is no critic.

The critic proper is neither a tutor in the technics

of the art which he criticises, nor an examiner commissioned to allot marks to its practitioners in accord with strict distributive justice, as in the sight of God. He, too, in his humble way, is an artist as they are. And every artist's business is to express his own individual, autonomous, possibly uncommon or wayward sense of something that presents itself to him. Milton expresses in *L'Allegro* his delighted sense of the beauty of the happiest rustic life, and Hazlitt expresses in a theatre notice his delighted sense of the beauty of Kean's Shylock. Both are artists in so doing. Charles Lamb is just as much an artist in describing his personal sensations in presence of Munden and Elliston at the height of their powers as he is in doing similar justice to his impressions of the old Christ's Hospital or of the Temple. His famous portrait of Dicky Suett is as strictly a work of art as is Reynolds's portrait of Garrick. Charlotte Brontë makes no break in the artistry of her *Villette* when she imbeds in it a descant on a piece of acting by Rachel. A critic differs from other literary artists in nothing but the accident that his subjects are found in a special field of his own, as indeed theirs are too, as a rule. Ostler in an old inn-yard or actor on a stage, the spoken work of some delectable Sarah Gamp or the written word of some delicious poet—little it matters what your delighted spirit delights in, so long as it does delight; whatever be the theme, a Falstaff himself or a comedian's acting of him, the lark at dappled dawn, startling the dull night, or Milton's rapture about it, a mother nursing her first child or the Sistine Madonna, the voice of your private ecstasy is art. Its utterance is not a judicial act nor a pedagogic one nor the professional

act of a surveyor, a public analyst or an inspector of nuisances. An artistic act, it has to be judged by the canons of art and not by those of mensuration or of public justice.

So it is off the point to complain that this or that critic is not just or is not fair or that he has favourites among the fellow artists whom he criticises. What good artist was ever minded like a good magistrate or had no capricious preferences and enthusiasms of his own? Caprice, the gadding eye, the unaccountably selecting and disproportionately emphasising tongue are the very birth-marks of his breed. Of the merit and value of the finest criticism it is seldom an important part that it was "right", either in its placing of a writer or other artist in his proper rank or in deciphering the less obvious intentions of his work. Two of the most deservedly famous critics of the nineteenth century, Ruskin and Pater, offered diametrically opposite readings of the meaning of Botticelli's "Judith". Both pieces of writing were capital criticism, because each expressed with beauty an authentic transport of personal joy in the picture. Both of the writers lauded highly at other times a considerable number of contemporaries who were certainly no better than middling performers in their several arts. One of them cried down angrily and contemptuously one of the finest artists of his generation. And yet they were great critics, unapproached by the mere art-experts who can give you a classification of all living and dead writers or painters in an order which probably is not far wrong. In spite of a hundred perversities, Ruskin's outburst of ecstasy at sight of St. Mark's is one of the highest jets of critical force and beauty ever cast up by the human

mind; it has that surpassing energy of joy and admiration. Pater may be wholly wrong, in a minor sense, in his interpretation of the "Monna Lisa" at the Louvre, but still the celebrated tirade on that subject is a supreme piece of criticism; an apt mind has been stirred and has poured itself out nobly in adoration of what it believed that it saw. That is enough; the great passage remains an example of criticism in all the wonder and glory of a lofty vehemence not given to common minds.

3

As soon as one lays down a rule, or anything like it, one has to face the inevitable exception. William Archer, lately dead, was a good dramatic critic, although his mind had a habit of moving along lines which seldom lead to good criticism. He had, to a degree rare in the southern half of Great Britain, the logical as opposed to the intuitive temper. He distrusted emotion for which he could not find a rational basis.

To all critics it happens now and then to feel some lively emotion in presence of a new book or play which seems to ignore or defy some axiom or postulate which the critic has hitherto thought valid. In such a case the intuitive critic will go pretty far on the line of trusting to emotion; he has been moved and, to him, that element in a sound valuation of a piece of work is more likely to turn out right in the end than any rule or axiom which sets itself up against this spontaneous stir of the spirit. His chief impulse is to justify that stir, at any rate to find precise or stimulating expression for it; he will not much care

if some highly considered critical standard has to be thrown overboard in the process.

Archer shrank from doing that. His bent was to treat any such vagrant emotion as English law treats a person "found wandering without visible means of subsistence". He brought the emotion to trial before the upright and knowledgeable court of his mind. He did the best that he could for it; he interrogated it; he tried to find some sound precedent, some relevant clause of critical law, which would give the emotion a proper place of its own in the ordered system of an educated playgoer's psychology. But if none could be found, he was adamantine; the thing was irrational; he would have none of it.

In nine cases, perhaps, out of ten, Archer and a good critic of the intuitive kind would be of much the same mind about a new play. But to that common result they would travel by different roads, and in a tenth case the rationalist road and the impressionist road might not join at all; two conflicting estimates would go on record; the other man would say he had experienced agreeable vibrations, and so there must have been some good in the piece; Archer would say that in some vital, or mortal, sense the dramatist had gone about it the wrong way, and that nothing first-rate could come of such doings, whatever one's own wayward sensations might have been.

A danger attending Archer's methods, or instinct, is that new artistic values and powers may come to be, with which the extant apparatus of critical assessment is not complete enough to deal. Or take an old case. No critic has yet shown—with authority, I mean, and not as the scribes—why tragedy should be so enjoyable as it is, although the drastic and exalting

intensity of this enjoyment is one of the facts from which coherent critical thought must start. It seems more likely that the final illumination of this magnificent patch of darkness may be achieved by those critics who approach a great tragedy as an artist approaches a sombre landscape—that is, burning only to express his own large emotions in its presence—than by those who consciously come to extract from the sombre delights of *King Lear* or *Phèdre* new illuminations of certain scientific "laws" of dramatic procedure. But let there be no belittling of such qualities as Archer's—his coherent thinking, his sense of the worth of order and workmanship, his impatience of humbug, sloppiness, and gush. Not in hospitals alone is there a use for strong antiseptics, and as long as slugs abound in the garden, good carbolic acid should not lack its meed of honour.

## 4

Among all but a few choice artists, as well as among the public at large, there can scarcely fail to be a smouldering, if not a flaming dissatisfaction with any competent critic. To them he always seems to be missing some mark which they wish to be his; they see a quite good function for him, and he does everything but perform it. The honest average playgoer simply wants to be told what play is best worth going to—for *him*, the honest, average playgoer. What, he asks, can be a critic's business, if not that? And yet here are the critics always letting him down, if he minds them at all, prompting him, perhaps, to see the dullest, crankiest stuff with their inexplicable gush about its significance and its charm. The

distinguished actress wants a prolific and steady purveyor of "good notices" to paste into her book of press cuttings; the painter wants a whole-souled devotee to play Ruskin to his Turner or Mahomet to his Allah; public moralists cannot see why the possessor of such a sword should not use it with all his might for the correction of abuses against which they have themselves taken arms.

Yet all these censors of the critic do, or may, get what they want from that perverse person. He cannot act as agent and taster for everyone; still it does happen at times that his own cries of delight in a new book, a play or a picture, assure someone who reads him that here is the stuff they too would delight in. As he goes on, he unconsciously enrolls a following of like-minded persons; he does, without attempting it, act as taster for these; he helps them to what they need. The artist too, the actor or novelist, may not be sure of receiving, every time, his fill of quotable eulogy; but in the long run he may secure one of the tremendous prizes of that sort; at the hand of a gifted critic he may receive such an immortalising tribute as makes Dicky Suett still visible to the eyes of every new reader of Elia. And as to reforms and improvements, artistic or moral—well, if they be really worth having, the critic rightly endowed for his job is commonly found to be for them incidentally, though not as his special affair, just as your loftiest men of genius are commonly found to be on the side of proper drainage for the roads they live in, although they be no great pundits or zealots about sanitation in general.

Personal lines of critical writing are many; all art is intensely individualistic; and yet all first-rate critics are, in some measure, banded in one army,

fighting in the same everlasting war, and substantially agreed in distinguishing the uniforms of trash, the immemorial enemy, and of sound work, the friend. And so the capable critic does by the way, and casually, a good deal of that which he is wrongly expected to make his first business in life. He does, in the end, work out a kind of undesigned and indirect classification, by merit, of those whose work has furnished him with subjects. He does supply readers of congenial mind with some sort of guidance among the confusion of works offered to their choice. He does advance sane "movements" of which he is no conscious leader, and helps, almost unwittingly, to scour away plagues of dull lubricity and what not, which inconvenience the art that he delights in. So he is tolerated by many who still feel, on the whole, that he has somehow gone wrong and missed a higher calling than the one in which he chooses to labour.

# *Easy Reading, Hard Writing*

# EASY READING, HARD WRITING

## I

While I write, the money articles tell us that, after an Arctic Winter, investment stocks are catching the first tepid rays of what looks like a sun. To bask in the coming warmth, along with these treasures, there comes a near relation of theirs, a new stock that may justly appeal to uninsured fathers of families. It is a massive edition of R. L. Stevenson's Works, "collected", "limited", freshly prefaced, bound in fair blue buckram, lettered as nobly as a Georgian tombstone, gilt-edged beyond even its brethren the gilt-edged securities.

These are the things to buy, to support your old age. Good, canny layers-down of books to ripen still talk about the first collected "R.L.S.", the "Edinburgh" one, with the honest emotions of wonder, gratitude and reverence which fire those of their fellow-investors who shared in the blessings of the upright, the noble flotation of Guinness's Brewery. Then, when the Edinburgh was approaching twice its published price, there came the "Pentland" Stevenson, rich above even the Edinburgh codex in enshrining that horrific yarn "The Body-Snatcher" —the mere advertisement of this, along the London gutters, in its first youth, is rumoured to have led to the arrest of sandwich-men. On eagle pinions the Pentland soared above par. You can still purchase a Pentland, as you can purchase a British gold pound, or the egg of a Great Auk. But you have to be rich,

and to know where to go. And so, to appease the unsated hunger of the lettered public, there comes the new thing of beauty. No doubt the thousand copies allotted to Europe were all bought up by the wise at the first whisper of their conception, as whole crops of cotton are bought by thoughtful men while the seedlings are only just blinking up into daylight. That is why one unstained by the guile of the tipster is venturing now to point to this surpassing "good thing". The tip is innocent, because too late—though even now you might possibly mark down one of the fortunate thousand, one of those who had "got in on the ground floor"—some oldish man—and settle somewhere near him, to wait till he dies.

2

But why this steady, lasting boom in Stevenson? The pink, square-backed "collected" Meredith did not go off with any such rush. The "New York" edition of Henry James went notoriously slowly, although it was beautiful too, and although the prefaces written for it by James divulged the closest workshop secrets that any novelist has yet confided to non-novelists. Both Meredith and James had minds of firmer and loftier build than Stevenson's. Meredith had newer, more momentous things to tell you. James, in a life of austere artistic integrity, carried the exploration of the technics of his craft into depths and recesses almost as fascinating as Leonardo da Vinci's abstruse, inspired-looking speculations about his. And yet Meredith and James lie a-mouldering more or less, at least for the moment, while Stevenson has, so far, discomfited time and its little changes of

critical fashions. Like John Brown's soul he still goes marching on, from edition to edition. *Easy Reading,*

Is it that he recognised, more freely than those other two, a writer's obligation to please us all the time that we read him? Whatever Stevenson lacks, all his writing has an engaging surface. As he would have said, it arrides you; wherever you open him—novels, essays, letters or verse—and read a sentence or two, the texture of the stuff has sparkle; whatever he means to convey at the time is being vivaciously put; the wordage is like the paint of some painters who may not be great but are always witty and winning and treat you as no blind horse but a man who has some wit of his own, and can take a thing in and knows quality when he sees it. *Hard Writing*

It is a discourtesy common in writers to tackle the reader as if he had to read them and need not be wooed—as though they were preachers in some garrison church where troops must sit it out to the end, however they may suffer. Carlyle and Ruskin, in their less inspired hours, practised this incivility freely. Like a reader of the Lessons in the services of the Church of Scotland they challenge your attention with a preparatory, "Hear now the Word of God as it is written, etc.", and then plunge straight into some knotty matter handled with less charm than that which almost always graces the pencil, as Bacon calls it, of the Holy Ghost. Some of these uncivil writers are prone to aggravate their offence by the sophistical plea that matter is more important than manner, and that if your heart be sound you need not mind how you splutter it out. They feel they are so wise or so good that they need not be urbane.

The better-bred writer begins and goes on in the

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faith that this is a free country, where no adult need read a line that he feels to be dull; every sentence of every page is, to the writer's prescient mind, a place at which one or another reader may take his spectacles off and protest that these are no sort of victuals to offer to a free white man. A godly fear of such incidents makes him treat every sentence he writes as a possible occasion for tedium. Through each he must wile the reader unbored, remembering that one dull paragraph may rob a whole book of its chance in life. He may even tend to think of each of his longer sentences as if it were a whole book, only writ small—an organism, an affair of structural and decorative parts; he feels it should work to a climax, tie, like a tragedy or comedy, its little knot, and then untie it and slope fascinatingly down from its meridian to its setting, ingeniously making the reader expectant while it rises to its zenith, and then amusing him with something piquantly unexpected, and yet satisfying in the *dénouement*.

3

To the mind of such a writer clearness in the narrow sense—the thin lucidity of what passes at times for scientific statement—is not enough. He seeks to raise mere logical precision to higher powers of veracity by mobilising the subtler evocative values of words, their richness in secondary suggestion, their capacity to stimulate in the reader intuitive faculties more penetrative than formal reasoning. In his intercourse with readers he will satisfy Newman's famous definition of a gentleman as one who never inflicts pain: he will always try to be good company, to make you at home and at ease and pleased with

yourself. To this end he will practise the light urbanities and coquetries of eighteenth-century essayists—the illusion not made too explicit; the points only indicated, not pressed; the humorous turnings-back from the very verge of set eloquence, the headings-off of any overstrained feeling; the current implication that you are a choice spirit, quick at the uptake, and do not need to have every point stressed. Perhaps he will not quote many things in the formal way that uses the inverted comma, but he is likely to make play with the submerged quotation, the turning of some phrase of his own in a way that seems almost to wink at the reader, as though he would say, "Of course, being as well read, and bright as you are, you know what I have in my mind." Whatever your own degree of education may be, you feel, as you read him, that you are getting good value for any trouble you took, or pangs you endured at school; now it is all coming in; it is fitting you to embrace this agreeable chance of consorting with the elect. There may be nobler modes of appeal, but few are more winning.

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You may come to feel like Falstaff: "If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I'll be hanged; it could not be, else: I have drunk medicines." So you have, and the philtre that has won you is compounded of many simples, some of them far from being recondite, some so obvious that if you analyse the potion you may feel you have been taken in too easily. One minor ingredient often in use is the juxtaposing of words of dissimilar origin and tradition, the long Latin adjective like "incomparable" or "invulnerable" standing up against some monosyllabic Saxon noun, with a lively effect of harmony got surprisingly out of discord. Another little

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recipe for vivacity is a manner of calling half-dead words back to life, reviving by dexterous use the original metaphors now petrified—for most of us—and forgotten in words like "aspersion" and "suspicion"; a lively writer calls a shower-bath a light aspersion, or says of boating renewed after a frost "Again the stream suspects the keel", and, behold! the educated mind of you is pleasantly tickled; the little trick has reanimated for you the whole figurative element in language, so much of which is always tending to fade and lose its vividness.

4

He who writes to please is apt to be drawn further and further into the exploration of the mechanics of beauty, as you may call them. Readers there are who take it ill if you suggest that beauty requires some measure of engineering. Such readers are like the old-fashioned lovers who shuddered to think that the lady should have any digestive system. They want their poets to "sing but as the linnets sing", as Tennyson audaciously suggested that he did in "In Memoriam" —Tennyson, who wrote such lines as "On the bald street breaks the blank day", with its deftly bald and blank breaking of B's and L's and K's on your ear; Tennyson, who filled his "Charge of the Light Brigade" with artful imitations, for the mind's ear, of the noises of rumbling guns and of galloping hoofs heard at distances that change as the astute performance goes on.

You can seldom be sure how far the maker of any particular piece of literary beauty knows—consciously knows—all the means that he is taking.

When Coleridge composed—in a dream, as he alleged—

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree:
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea,

was he aware that, as Stevenson showed later on, he was running hard all through, a certain group or chord of letters—KANDLSR, the first line being built on a kind of framework of KANDL, the second on KDLSR, the third on all the seven letters of the chord, the fourth on KANLSR and the fifth on NDLS? Did he chop and change words in his dream, perhaps using at first the word "sombre" in the third line and then saying, "No, I must work in that K and that D," and so substituting the word "sacred"?

We may well doubt it. Quite as probably he just kept turning each line over and over in his mind, in some form which it took first, felt something gritty or obstructive here and there—perhaps in "sombre"—mused over possible alternative words, and, feeling when he tried "sacred" that the grit was gone, popped the word in, and there an end, without any consciousness of having stuck stoutly to the chord "KANDLSR" and escaped the seductions of the rival chord SMBR (which sounds like a useful dominant group for an "Ode to September"). But there the strong consonantal skeleton is, however it came in.

After dissecting many winning passages of Shakespeare and others, Stevenson convinced himself that the consonantal chord PVF was a kind of beauty-secret, and that in certain pieces of writing, like Milton's "Praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue",

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Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge and the lines in *Troilus and Cressida*:

> But, in the wind and tempest of her frown,
> Distinction, with a broad and powerful fan,
> Puffing at all, etc.,

the author was feeling his way, consciously or unconsciously, towards graceful clusters of these mellifluous consonants. Certainly your V and your F have an easily slipping or gliding way with them:

> From too much love of living,
> From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving
> Whatever Gods may be
> That no life lives for ever;
> That dead men rise up never;
> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea.

The charmful thing slides round full circle like a vane that revolves on ball bearings, and all the V's and F's are the balls.

But what about P? Very hard things have been said about P. Some years ago a writer in a literary journal arraigned P as "the ugliest of letters"—uglier even than S, with its reptilian sibilance and its difficulty in getting on with other consonants next it. Yet P's contrive to minister to grace in the convivial catch of

> Plumpy Bacchus with pink eyne

in *Julius Caesar*. In two other songs of Shakespeare's, when they are sung well, to the right tune, a perfectly placed P has a charming trick of causing a tiny check or hang in the rhythm:

Take, oh take, those lips away;

and

Of dumps so dull and heavy.

At each P it is as if a brook came to a stone in its way, paused for an instant and then broke upon it and flowed on; perhaps it is because the slowly formed labial marks time, as it were, for one pace, before making its little explosion, while the other consonants around it step straight on.

It may well be that Swinburne never counted up all those V's of his—nor even the ripplesome L's and R's that he crammed, along with them, into the line:

With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain.

As for Shakespeare, we do not quite see him taking the trouble. And yet it is a likely field enough for Shakespeare cryptogrammatists of a superior order:

M, O, A, I, doth sway my life.

Is nothing to be made of that as a "key" or a "clue" to Shakespeare's secret preoccupation with this letter-rigging business? Or is it just, as Fabian said on its first publication, "a fustian riddle"?

## 5

See how I wander. Every such question raises another and then another, as sin doth lead on sin. Consider now, in the slightest dipping way, the possible delights and dangers of the melody of prose.

Some years ago a dramatic critic went to the first night of a prose play. At least, so the advertisements said. What he found himself hearing, as soon as the curtain went up, was prose of this sort:

Ah, dear playfellow, then your hand sought mine;
We wandered in the woods, and as we sat
Beneath the summer shade, your soft cheek pressed
'Gainst mine, your little heart beat answer to
My pulse, the while we stared with anxious eyes
To see the fairies dancing in their rings.

The critic demurred, on the ground, roughly speaking, that the goods were not of the nature and quality advertised by the vendor. The author took it in good part, but he said to the critic: "I am sorry you don't like rhythm in prose."

That almost gravelled the critic. How was he to explain, without writing a book, that rhythmical prose and metrical prose—which is verse—are different things. If you tell a man that he must not have in his prose complete lines of verse, he can truthfully say: "Oh, but everyone does, now and then. Not to mention Dickens, whose funerals are almost as metrical as *Paradise Lost*, you can scarcely read a page of any English writer without finding at least one line of blank verse. There was one from your own censorious pen a moment ago—'The author took it in good part, but he——'." If you admit this to be true, but say that it is almost impossible, either in speech or writing, to avoid the accidental composition of an occasional line of a metre so simple and so free-and-easy, he may rejoin: "Well, a metre exactly the reverse is the classical hexameter of Homer and Vergil. So what about the complete hexameters to be found in the Authorised Version of the Bible, such as 'Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing?' and 'Husbands, love your wives and be not bitter against them'?"

At this point the prose purist's safest plan is to

ask the latitudinarian to produce a third one from the Bible if he can, or a single specimen from any other prose classic in any tongue, except Thucydides' *History*, in which two notoriously scannable hexameters are found. Probably he will fall back on the more advantageous ground of English blank verse and refer you, for instances of two, or even three, consecutive lines in the most respectable prose authors, to the end of *The Mill on the Floss*:

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> The days when they had clasped their little hands
> In love, and roamed the daisied fields together,

and Ruskin's professedly prose description of the façade of Saint Mark's—

> Robed to the feet, and leaning to each other
> Across the gates, their figures indistinct
> Among the gleaming of the golden ground.

Such pleas may not be wholly gainsaid. And yet prose is prose and verse is verse, however much of the work of great masters of prose can be scanned and however prosaic Clough's *Bothie* may be. Rare exceptions are not rules; any professional writer of prose soon comes to feel that when he flops into two lines of blank verse running, it shows he is tired and ought to knock off work for the day. Anything sentimental in a prose writer's thought, any weak half-pressure state of his imagination, pushes him towards unconscious versification: if you have to look at many bad novels you find that a writer who is attempting a higher strain of elevation or pathos than his powers can compass tends to drift into the metre of poetic drama. And where prose is best of all, as in parts of Goldsmith and Swift, and in Shakespeare's prose letters, it heads off any approach of formal metre with

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a wary persistence that cannot be accidental. Yet such prose is at least as melodious as poetry:

> Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit; and since, in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure: if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.

There the rhythm undulates along with a curious gentle urgency; its modulation, quite apart from the meaning of the words, goes far to express tenderness, dignity and resignation. And yet, read naturally, it never quite takes any known form of verse. But yet, again, its music is worked out from the same units or components as is the music of metre. Like fine verse it is an affair of stresses and of spacings-out, of the marshalling of more and of less strongly accented syllables into an order which somehow brings beauty to pass. You can trace in it some describable rises and falls; some of its cadences are among the ones used in those masterpieces of prose harmony, the Morning and Evening Prayer of the English Church —themselves derived in this respect from the Latin prayers of the undivided Church, and, quite perceptibly, from such masters of the Latin of the prime as Cicero.

Scholarship has analysed to some slight extent this method of achieving beauty; certain "dying" and other "falls", at the ends of resonant sentences, have received names. But prose rhythm remains immeasurably less amenable to formulation and definition than metre. And so it is more difficult. Though a poet has always to write with certain metrical conditions in mind, and though they are hard, still they do help

to make his task finite; at least he knows when he has achieved conformity to them. Prose is more exacting because you never know when you have "got there"; you might go on trying for ever to come nearer and nearer to its less definable aim. *Easy Reading, Hard Writing*

## 6

Here we are, down a by-road again, when we meant no more than to point it out as a place where writers whose intent is all for our delight are fond of loitering and speculating. They like to probe further and further the aesthetic values of syllables and letters, stressed or unstressed, apart from the obvious sense of the words which they help to compose. As modern potters interrogate in their laboratories the glazes used in ancient China, so do these writers seek to analyse the work of classic writers, at their highest strain of beauty, in the hope of disengaging new clues to creatable grace and pleasantness.

Of the coarser results of this minding of P's and Q's one seems to see a specimen in the popular hymn:

> Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
> Look upon a little child.

The little game the author plays with his jingling J's and M's in the first line and the crude alliteration of his three L's in the second are just what a dull man might take to be in the tradition of Milton's—

> Lap me in soft Lydian airs,
> Married to immortal verse,

with its bewitching chime of stressed L's in one line and of M's in the next. Done with a more subtle ingenuity, like Thackeray's exercises in the technique

*Easy Reading, Hard Writing*

of Goldsmith, Steele and Addison, or Mr. Kipling's adaptations of the workmanship of Border ballads and Bret Harte, such reconstruction may be genuine creation too; what might be taken to be the researches of a Dryasdust may bring new and fresh beauty to the birth, like the violets from Ophelia's grave.

Your easy reading, Sheridan said, is "damned hard writing". If a book moves with a gliding, mellifluous or lightly tripping gait, the seeming ease is almost always illusive. A writer who is really swift and copious, like Henry James, leaves much of the simplification, the planing and burnishing, to be done by the perspiring brain of the reader. So the hardest reading has often been the easiest writing. It is much easier to write such a sentence as "There was never a mistake for you that he could leave unmade, nor a conviction of his impossibility in you that he could approach you without strengthening", than a sentence like "A' came ever in the rearward of the fashion, and sung those tunes to the over-scutched huswives that he heard the carmen whistle, and sware they were his fancies or his good-nights . . . and now has he land and beefs". The former sentence is still in the rough; it is only at the stage of semi-raw material for the writer's craft. Grammatically, logically, it is defensible, as is the language of leases and conveyances. You can make it out if you try. It is what might have come into the head of a Goldsmith or Lamb as something that he might turn into literature. In the other sentences this transformation has been made. The words have been picked, sifted clean and put into tune; they have taken on colour; abstract description has become incarnate in sensuous images; the great escape has been made from mere intellectu-

alism, with its universals and essences, to concrete particulars, the smell of human breath, the sound of voices, the stir of living. To do all this is work, work intoxicantly delightful to the right man for it, but still work, shouldered by the writer and not left to the reader to plug away at, if he can and will. A writer who shoulders it with a will may be, like Stevenson, no great things as a man or a philosopher. But if he have wit and some skill at his trade, he will be kindly regarded by readers; much will be forgiven him —washy sentiment, commonplace thought, want of structure in the larger sense—just because he does not take it on himself to serve up his salads without any attempt at a dressing.

*Easy Reading, Hard Writing*

# *Doing without Workmanship*

# DOING WITHOUT WORKMANSHIP

## I

SURELY one of the most delectable bees that ever buzzed in a bonnet is the old dream that in art the right thing to do is to do without workmanship. From time to time it visits, in force, the minds of the young. To write, to paint, to sing—all with your soul alone and without the tainted assistance of any mere technical methods or formulae: it seems as if the nobleness of life were to do this; base is the slave who fritters away the auroral freshness of his genius on the coolie work of learning how to draw, to scan or to practise scales. As the Dauphin thought of his horse, so does fond youth, at times, of its yet untrained Pegasus: "When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk: he trots the air: the earth sings when he touches it; the basest horn of his hoof is more musical than the pipe of Hermes". What should a creature made of pure air and fire, like this, have to do with the dull elements of metre or perspective, or the mechanical tricks of voice production or scansion? "Off, off, you lendings!" So the pleasant dream runs.

Immediately after the Great War, whole hives of bees, of this agreeable species, buzzed in the collective bonnet of youth. And with some reason. The greatest of wars had been won by commanders and general staffs whom few suspected of having polluted their natural genius with any such technical proficiency in the science of war as had been noticed in the leaders of the vanquished. It looked like the

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dawn of an era of triumph for good go-ahead dispensers with workmanship. Youth, besides, was at the moment enormously in favour. It had had the largest share of gruelling in the war; it had come out with credit; there was a general inclination among its elders—the youth of yesterday—to cocker it up and to say in an emotional tone that, in art and everything else, youth was the time of life when a man really knew how to do things—now it was certainly going to start everything over again, and much better, on lines that the old men, the youth of the day before yesterday, could never have thought of.

2

So youth, sped by the ancient dream that seemed so new in its own head, went the pace with a high heart. Never had there been such times for songs without a tune and portraits *minus* the face. We are not sure that anyone set up as a fiddle soloist on the strength of never having had a lesson from any living soul. But the best galleries in London, Paris and Berlin, abounded in pictures so unspotted by the taint of "representationism" that spectators would earnestly argue whether the scene which they kept to themselves was an Algerian market-place, a Dutch farm or an urban interior. And there were poems. A stanza of one of them, not an extreme specimen of its kind, haunts the mind:

His limbs
Dangle
Like marionettes
Over
a
mauve
Sea.

An idea, you perceive, unblemished by any application of mere workmanship. It is much as if Shakespeare had not fobbed us off with the laborious and overdone *Doing without Workmanship*

> Hark, hark, the lark at Heaven's gate sings,
> And Phoebus 'gins arise,
> His steeds to water at those springs
> On chaliced flowers that lies,

but had fairly made comrades of us, taken us into his confidence, given us the first intimate germ of the thing—perhaps

> Observe the
> Lark
> Before
> Breakfast
> Grass
> still
> plaguily
> Wet.

When Corot used to go a-painting early on misty summer mornings he always knocked off work about nine o'clock. He used to say, "Everything can be seen now. And so there's nothing to see." He felt that the half was more than the whole; as soon as the elements of a landscape began to emerge from the first tender vapours enough to take definite shape, they lost part of their expressive value. Moved, perhaps, by some kindred notion, an early post-war poet produced this mist-drenched stanza:

"Haw, haw, haw, haw, haw . . ." ". . . surest thing you know . . ."
"I can't stand Whitman's tripe . . ." ". . . eh, no more gin?"
"Dirt cheap for twenty bob . . ." "'E got run in . . ."
"I soon ticked 'im orf . . ." ". . . what a rotten show . . ."

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One wondered. Was it a first study, like a painter's for some projected masterpiece? As time went on, and the poet slept on his work a good many times, would he strike at last on what he was now only feeling—would there come to him some imperious and enchanting sense of a music which as yet was out of hearing but might be drawn within reach, captured and fixed in some happy moment of magical extension of sense and imagination? One wondered. Yes, before Swinburne attained to such a stanza as—

> From too much love of living,
> From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving
> Whatever Gods may be
> That no life lives for ever;
> That dead men rise up never;
> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea—

did the work pass through a stage of roughing out, when the poet jotted down on paper typical fragments of the voices of his age, perhaps with notes, like this:

> Huxley: "Immortality is simply dope."
> Jowett: "Not so sure. You wait and see."
> Disraeli: "The angels are the boys for me."
> Tennyson: "Well, anyhow, there's just a kick in hope."
>
> (*N.B.* Seems the only bomb left for me to throw is "Good riddance, the whole business".
>
> *N.B.* 2. See Baudelaire's simile of tired river.)

A critic who dared to express at the time these doubts and hopes and hesitations soon found himself in hot water. That elliptic fancy—

His limbs
Dangle
Like marionettes
Over
a
mauve
Sea—

had left in a poor critic a haunting sense, as yearning people say, of want, of something unfulfilled. His confession of this brought upon him a charge of "voluptuous indolence". He was suspected of craving for the flesh-pots of "conventional rotundity" and "elaborate sonority" in poetry.

But was it really he that was the idler, the sporter with Amaryllis in the shade? Had not the poet left himself an inordinate share of leisure for repose, when he ceased to meditate the thankless muse at the point reached by his lines? Would not Burns have been more voluptuously indolent than he was if he had not wrought his stanza up to the point of

We twa hae paidlet i' the burn,
Fra' morning sun till dine;
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin' auld lang syne,

but had left it at some such early stage as

Both of us
Once
Lived
on
the
Doon.
He is
now
in
The States.

*Doing without Workmanship*

Certainly Burns would in that case have left more to the reader's imagination. He would have left everything to it. And, in a sense, it is well to leave much to the reader's imagination. But in what sense? A well-drafted lease of a charming country house leaves a great deal to the imagination. But that, unsupported by other evidence, does not prove the solicitor who drafted it to be a poet. The "Ode to Autumn", or *Lycidas*, would leave much more to the imagination if every second line were knocked out, but it would not necessarily be improved by these lacunae. This business of leaving things to the imagination, if it were carried on with a too-unreflective ardour, might end by reducing poetry to a series of titles for poems, each followed, perhaps, by a few rows of asterisks, just to show what the poet could do an he would. In that millennium of the stimulated imagination a few indolent or miserly voluptuaries might grumble at paying for "Nocturnes" in which there were no actual words, light or dark, or for a sonnet sequence wholly composed of Roman numerals at the tops of blank pages. Still, an answer to them would be ready: the poets could make famous fun of these awkward customers. "What came ye forth for to see?" the poets might say. "The elaborate sonorities of Milton? The fair round bellies of the works of Keats?"

Perhaps the real trouble with the mauve sea-piece is not that it leaves too much to the imagination, but that it does nothing to stir it. A motorist may do well not to try to propel his car by continuous use of the starting handle in front. Still, he has to start the engine somehow. And, few as the words of the mauve sea-piece are, they are too many, in a way. None of

them pulls its weight in the boat; none of them springs any vision in our dull minds, none of them helps start the engine. They have not gone through the fire from which five common words such as "brightness falls from the air" emerge with a new evocative power over the mind. They remain mere indications that the writer, a poet maybe, maybe not, has approached a subject on which he thinks that a poem might be written. He has not begun it.

3

Like other things the old hope of doing great work without workmanship undergoes changes of fashion. More kinds of cricketer than one are unable to make runs. There is the man who has studied exactly the way that Grace or Ranjitsinhji or Hobbs walks to the wicket and stands beside it, glances round at the field, and pats down the turf. He can do it all exactly as the great original did. And yet this imitator, perhaps, cannot bat. There is also the man, equally far from having power to score, who would perish sooner than run like one of those heroes who tighten his cap on his head with the same gesture as another. Both these ineffectual ones are preoccupied with inessentials, by way of aping them or of eschewing them. So is it with writers to whom the divine accident, the knack of taking fire, refuses to come. Some of them make an inordinate fuss about catching the lesser technicalities and the mannerisms of accepted masters of the trade. This kind abounded in the Victorian age, so far as there was such an age. They mimicked with precision the more obvious rhythmical tricks of "In Memoriam" and "The Blessed Damozel", they used

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superfluous capitals like Carlyle and treated the semicolon like Dickens. That particular way of amounting to nothing in literature is less common now. More common, for the moment, is the converse way—the alternative course of parasitism. This course is to discard the more obvious parts of the technique of all the great workmen in letters; as most of them rhymed there must be no rhyme; as they had rhythm there must be none; as they did not write lines of one word alone, one word lines there must be. So, this way and that, oscillates the current fashion among uninspired writers who have not served any serious apprenticeship. "We shift and bedeck and bedrape us," as the convention swings to and fro, and one generation of null and void writers struts in Swinburnian arabesques of alliteration and heavy brocades of sound, and the next in such cutty sarks as these tuneless linelets of one word apiece. But in the "pure eyes And perfect witness of all-judging Jove", we fancy it comes to much the same thing.

## 4

In the first years after the war there was a sort of shyness among the elder brethren of the trade of letters about recalling humdrum truths to the eager young things then capering with joy at the thought that Adam's curse was off at last and the need for workmanship gone from the world. Youth had had a bad time in the war; everybody was sorry for youth and felt rather sentimental about it. Some of the sympathy took the unlucky form of a suggestion that youth had just come into a kind of Messianic mission, and that it must not be whipped or put right any

more, but looked to for the rescue of all of us and our arts from the mess that we had made.

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No doubt the young, so far as their souls were in health, laughed at this gushing idealisation of themselves. But the angelic guardianship of a healthy soul could not be everywhere. Where it failed, youth must often have snuffed up the offered myrrh and frankincense without demur and agreed that there was a divine wisdom in inexperience.

To bring this about was a cruel unfairness to the youth of that day. The war had been bad for it, anyhow. Compared with the youth of earlier and later dates, it had struck a poor time to grow up in: it would have to bestir itself more than they in order to be anything but an undersized generation. Part of it had lain mentally fallow on active service during years when the mind should grow most; part had passed those adolescent years at schools lamed by losses of staff and by all-round distraction from their chief business. Peace had brought only the shabby, dispiriting spectacle of Versailles, with its base greeds and timidities, and of an England morally tired, flabby and cross. It was no hour of which to sing that it was joy to be alive in it, and heaven to be young. Small blame to clever, half-disciplined youth if it lost its head for a while, being invited so to do, and forgot for the moment the terms on which big things can be done.

All that, however, is pretty well over now[1], and the recuperative gift of its young tissues is showing itself with a will. The Paris picture shows of the moment, the latest plays in Berlin, the current English output of verse, all show concurrent signs that lively minded

[1] This essay was written in 1927.

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youth is losing faith in mere temperamental hurricane and formless "subjectivity", and coming back to workmanship. The tumult and the shouting die; the thunder on the Left subsides. Out of a period of confused valuations, of underrated difficulties, of little egoisms mistaken for big individualities, youth in art is working valiantly back to a revived sense of the wonder, glory and indispensableness of workmanship.

# *The Blessing of Adam*

# THE BLESSING OF ADAM

## I

A MAN with some darling craft of his own must scratch his head in wonder when he hears some of the things that are daily said about work. One day he finds labour put down as a curse that came on Adam at the Fall—as if Adam had never done a day's digging before his eviction. Another day we are bidden to hope that if the invention of tricks to save labour can only go on as fast as it is going now, we may yet have no need to work more than two hours a day, or possibly one. Even sages so fully accredited as Mr. Bertrand Russell propose that we should knock off presently for all but four hours a day. He would turn us out for the rest of our time, to get what good we could out of a set of fine abstract nouns—science and art, friendship and love, the contemplation of natural beauty and of the immensity of the universe. Husks, mere husks, unless you peg away at them so hard that this, too, becomes work, and so gives you back the delicious fatigues you have lost.

As if we could not see for ourselves that one of the saddest men on earth is he who has made his pile in some business early in life and who only looks in at the office for one or two hours a day to bully the clerks and then return to his Old Masters and roses, the wife of his bosom and the spectacle of the firmament. As if we had never seen children or artists or scientific researchers! A normal child has no spite

against work until you have drilled one into him by some form of dis-education. You put him out in a sunny garden to play: he has about him everything that Mr. Bertrand Russell rates highest—sand for engineering science, a paint-box for art, dolls for his affections, a foreground of agreeable landscape and the whole dome of the heavens to contemplate. No good; in half an hour he is plaguing you to let him do some "real work"; he wants to sweep up dead leaves or to help with the mowing. He will not tire of doing it, either, except in the bodily way, and then he will come again, thirsting for toil, the next morning. So powerful is this innate craving for labour that it may take all the massed resources of a great public school and of a famous and ancient university to make a boy believe that real work is a thing to flee from, like want or disease, and that doing it and "having a good time" are states naturally and immutably opposed to one another.

Or look at the man of science, the mighty hunter of knowledge, some time when his nose is well down on a hot scent. Offer him a release from all but two hours' work in the day. He will hoot at you. Why, when he goes to bed of a night he probably thinks greedily, "Only just the few hours that I'm asleep —and those don't really count—and then time for dressing and breakfast, and then I can get at it again. Hurrah!"

2

Consider, above all, the artist. Some years ago the leagued artists of Italy, bitten by the spirit of the age, proclaimed a one-day strike—to "draw attention", as the phrase is, to the scurvy mutilation of a portrait

by a noble lord who had sat for it and then did not like it. Whether this bolt from blue Southern skies blasted the impious peer is not certain, but every feeling heart knew that it must, at any rate, have inflicted a pretty smart pang on its projectors. For strikes are deeply different things when the work you lay down is a job that suffers from some relative poverty in charm, such as totting up endless small sums at a desk or feeding coal in at the door of a furnace, and when it is one that keeps you full of a pleasant presentiment that before long you will set the Thames or the Tiber on fire with the enormous sparks that are constantly being given off by your genius. Any sound moralist will tell you that your sense of the dignity of labour, and of the moral beauty of sweeping a room as by divine law, ought to make stoking or dusting a task as amusing as that of turning out masterpieces in marble or paint. Yet those of us who do neither of these good things have a rooted notion that it must be some of the best fun in the world to paint as Reynolds did it, and quite poor fun, in a comparative sense, to dust out railway carriages. The cleaner can, as a rule, control for a long time his passion for the act of cleaning for cleaning's sake. But an inspired painter would pretend in vain that he did not mind downing brushes at all, and that football and a little racing were quite good enough to pass the time for him. We pretty well know that, to this grade of labour, work is what alcohol is to the dipsomaniac.

*The Blessing of Adam*

It shows once more the ineradicable goodness of human nature that, knowing this, we pay the artist any wages at all. Tactically we others have him in a cleft stick. A miner who will labour gratis in his

vocation is, as Dugald Dalgetty said of the refusal of coined money, a sight seldom seen in a Christian land. But if the world firmly refused to give the artist a farthing for his wares, the passionate creature would still go on painting. He could not give up, and, however rich he might be to the end of the stoppage, the misery of a long strike might be the death of him.

3

If it came to a grand economic dispute, no doubt the artist might try to dissemble this congenital disinclination for striking, in hopes of loosening this fine hold that we of the general public would have upon him. And sometimes the thought is apt to arise —must not a certain amount of this prudent dissimulation be practised by others? Or can it really be that a skilful plumber, or Mr. Bertrand Russell himself, would sincerely like to work at plumbing or at advanced mathematics and political philosophy for only two hours a day? At every congress of organised workmen there seems to run through almost every speech an implication that bodily work is nothing but an evil only to be borne for the sake of the pay that it brings, and that the few poor devils who do no work but try to while away their shabby days with expensive attempts at self-amusement have got hold of an undue share of happiness, to the exclusion of everybody who is busy. Is it possible that none of the speakers has ever known the kind of pervasive benediction that seems to descend on body and mind after the first hour or two of a day's digging, house-decorating or reaping? Or that delicious satisfaction in every tissue of yourself when you have completed

the new hen-house, and stump off at the end of the day to sleep in Elysium, stiff, slow and full of a contentment and serenity passing all understanding? *The Blessing of Adam*

Of course they have, all of them. There is no kind of work which is not loved passionately by some of those who do it—loved sometimes to the point of selfishness, so that a man will sooner let wife and children go short of food and teaching than give up the work of his choice for some other work on which the family could live better. And yet this kind of true love seems, in our time, to have no more than others of the knack of running smoothly. Like Viola, a good trade unionist will never tell his love. Something keeps the barrister earning his hundred pounds a day from letting out that even if every client were able to bilk him, and did it, still he would stick to his gladiatorial work for the joy and thrill of it, as so many shepherds who piped in Thessaly would manifestly have remained in the business, even if rural labour in those parts had become wholly unremunerative. On all sides the happy toiler's lips are apparently sealed by the real or supposed necessity of taking thought for the possibly evil effect of descants of joy and praise upon the mind of some human paymaster who comes into the affair.

Besides, there is the mischief that so much of our work has been bedevilled by unavoidable changes of circumstance. Childish as it is to think of going back, on any large scale, to archaic hand-work and petty production of all sorts, still the sentimentalists of hand-spinning, hand-weaving and hand-sewing have got hold of one truth—that there is more joy in a person who has slowly and clumsily made a whole piece of cloth single-handed than in ten persons who

have made a thousand pieces of cloth between them in the same time, by the aid of several cunning machines which they only half understand. To make the whole of a boat or wheelbarrow or vase with your own hands is to live again through a heart-warming triumph of early mankind's; you become a more or less conscious creator, a chuckling dominator of intractable elements and resistant forces. Little of the glee may be left if your part in making the vase be only to sift or wet the clay for somebody else to throw on the wheel. But it cannot be helped. We can no more go back, at this point in the life of our world, to be like the solitary master-potter of Omar Khayyám, wetting his clay for himself in the market-place, than middle-aged men can return to the use of their first teeth or the vocabulary of the nursery. The caravan has to go on; to loiter at any distance behind is to court extinction sooner than it need come. Machinery and mass-production are our fate, and if they have taken the natural delightfulness of work out of a great deal of it, that was when the real Fall came and not when Jehovah told Adam that there was a great deal of perspiration before him.

## 4

If a Fall it has been, then all the more reason to treasure those species of work which have not been deported from Eden. They may at least keep alive in the minds of the fallen some idea of what life was like in the garden. Even Genesis does not explicitly say, though it allows us to see, what the prime joy of it was—that Adam and Eve were creators as well as creatures—God's fellow-workmen as well as

pieces of his handiwork. And that joy of theirs goes on to this day wherever a painter, a writer, or any sort of artist is plying his trade at the top of his form. *The Blessing of Adam*

In current talk about such activities, and even in the theorising of learned men, it is commonly taken for granted that before a Shakespeare or a Leonardo begins to write or paint a "Last Supper" or a *Hamlet* he has already before his mind the whole thing which we now see—indeed a good deal more than we are now able to see of the unfortunate "Last Supper". The actual painting or writing is taken to be a mere transcribing of this pre-existent vision into paint or words. In one of the smallest and wisest of books about art, Professor Alexander's *Art and the Material*, this grand mistake is put right. Few artists of any sort can and will tell how they do their fine things. But Mr. Alexander has divined it.

That pre-existent vision does not pre-exist at all. It only comes into existence while the technical and physical work of painting or writing goes on. To what may end by being a masterpiece an artist may come at first with a mind empty and stone-cold. It may be that "Another commonplace model to paint!" was all that Raphael thought as he began the Sistine Madonna. Suppose it so. Well, he gets his tackle out and starts. In a little while the mere feel of the brush in his hand begins to excite him; the cold engine of his mind is warmed a little; it inclines to move; there kindles in him a faint spark of curiosity about the being who is before him; the quickened mind enlivens the hand, and the brush moves more featly; eagerness is growing in all the employed faculties of the man; images, thoughts, memories, sympathies crowd in upon him till he wonders at himself, with a

kind of alarm mixed in his delight—will he ever be able to keep himself up to this pitch, he is now so much above par, so strangely endowed, for while it may last, with spiritual insight and also with an unwonted dexterity of hand?

With an ease and confidence that amaze him he sees, infers, conjectures new things behind the fleshen mask of the familiar model's face. A wonderful creature, this sitter! Wonderful creature, a nursing mother! A marvel, all motherhood, all humanity. "What a piece of work is a man!" So it goes on, and if he can hold long enough the pitch of this exaltation, this mutual stimulation of spiritual and technical power, a masterpiece may come of it, a Sistine Madonna, a Hamlet, or a Gioconda, a thing absolutely new and surpassing, where nothing like it had been before—just what Adam was when first made. For we are to remember that before that exultantly supernormal interaction of imaginative and technical energies began in the man, there was, of all that came afterwards, nothing existent even as a vision in the man's mind—merely the commonplace Hamlet of some old melodrama, or some average middle-class lady or well-built laundress walking about like others in Florence. As Mr. Alexander says, "The portrait proceeds, not from imaginative anticipation of the portrait that is to be executed, but from a lively and intelligent excitement, using the skilled brush-hand as its instructive organ".

Art is only work utterly unspoilt, and drudgery is only art gone utterly wrong. But there was no necessary curse on Adam in this matter of work. He went out of Eden with Rome and Athens, Venice and Constantinople to build, and with all the rest of the world

to turn, if he chose, into gardens where people could knit in the sun, and workshops where they could whistle over the making of delectable implements, weapons and playthings. That was all blessing, as far as it went, whatever mess the poor fellow may have since made of his chance.

*The Blessing of Adam*

# *Delights of Tragedy*

# DELIGHTS OF TRAGEDY

## I

At an inquest held on a modern who shot himself in a London hotel it came out that this undervaluer of life had gone to a tragic play on the evening before. At this there was some wagging of beards in the coroner's court. The play was named and the coroner said: "Oh, I know it—a most depressing play, with a suicide at the end". The coroner's clerk and the usher obviously felt that things looked pretty black for the art of Racine.

Still, there was this to be said: it came out, also, that the desperate person had lost his health and all his money; that he had been divorced by his wife and dismissed by his employers, and that the staple of his diet had been alcohol for many years. So we cannot be wholly sure that the play alone did it. Voltaire himself allows that an incantation, combined with a proper quantity of arsenic, will unquestionably kill a sheep; and a man who had just seen *Othello* or some other "play with a suicide at the end" might quite well be inclined to blow out his brains with a certain amount of additional encouragement derived from sickness, dipsomania, want and unhappiness in the home.

Tragedy, we may admit, is not an expressly life-saving appliance, such as the fireproof curtain that commonly attends its performance. But can it, to any sane man, be positively lethal either? Ought *Hamlet*

and *Phèdre*, *Medea* and *Lear* to be scheduled along with cocaine, as perilous drugs? Shakespeare certainly is a terrible man for suicides at the end. So, should he be altogether tabooed, by way of starting a "safety-first" movement in theatres?

This, of course, is not an honest question. It is a rhetorical question. I am quite aware that nobody will answer "Yes". We all want to see tragedy played for all it is worth, unless there is something wrong with us at the time. But why do we want it? What makes it worth while to go out of our way in order to see the torments of Lear or the failure of Antony done, as we say, to the life? We are sometimes told that tragedy startles or frightens us, or that it makes us feel all mankind to be helpless and blind, or that it gives us a sense of fulfilment or waste—of greatness thrown away, or of strength and beauty frustrating themselves or tortured to death. But why are we moved to pay money in order to have it put to us that men are but worms or blind kittens, or that far more fine stuff goes to loss in this world than we should have supposed? If we dislike in "real life" the sight of misery, failure and corruption, why do we enjoy *Macbeth*? This is not a rhetorical question. I have no cocksure answer to it up my sleeve.

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Of course confident answers are common enough, some of them offered on high authority. One is that tragedy does indeed give you the sensations of fear, abasement or loss, but not as the world gives them; that by tragedy they come in an abated, purified, safeguarded form which does you good by bracing you to meet the attack of real error or bereavement at

other times. According to this theory the tragic writer and actor do to your soul something akin to what vaccinators do to your body: they do not inject the virus of fear or despair at its full strength, but only a kind of lymph distilled from the real thing, and rather like it, but somehow medicated so that it shall cause only a mild perturbation of your mind, about as like real anguish as three little eruptions on your arm are like confluent small-pox. *Delights of Tragedy*

It is a pretty fancy. It has about it, too, an imposing air of standing in with science. And yet it won't quite do. It goes too far away from the facts of experience —from what we all feel when we are moved by tragic novels or plays, and also from what we feel when we are vaccinated. We do not have ourselves vaccinated for pleasure. Far, far from it. The remote and negative after-effect is the one thing we want. But we do not go to see *Julius Caesar* played for the sake of a remote after-effect. No one books his seat with the sense of painful prudence which nerves us to go about for some days, by our own manful choice, with one arm in a sling. We go because we know we shall get from the tragedy, while we are there, a certain stir and glow in our minds; we want to induce in ourselves a specific mood of intense, if fugitive, exaltation—a mood sombre, no doubt, and perhaps sharing with actual sorrow such symptoms as tears, but still exultant and bringing with it a sense of heightened powers in heart and mind. To say how a lovely landscape affected him, Izaak Walton quotes the lines:

> I was for that time lifted above earth;
> And possessed joys not promised at my birth.

Fine tragedy, too, can fill you with that astonished

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consciousness of having been born into a more wonderful world than you knew; its early deaths, baffled loves and overshadowed lives become a kind of uncovenanted inlet for your spirit into something which you feel to be the ardent heart of life. The essence of your feeling is enjoyment.

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This essential enjoyment is given its place in a different theory, framed by Bergson, the sprightly modern philosopher. Bergson holds that we like tragedy because it can throw us into a delicious reverie of retrospection; under its spell, he suggests, we dream ourselves back into an earlier stage in which the naked heart of natural passion, such as tragedy often shows us in action, had not been cooled and covered up with crust upon crust of social usage and moral law, just as a cold and stiff crust has formed itself over the ball of molten metals and fiery vapours which the earth is said to have been. Bergson holds that when a tragedy works on us strongly we are tasting the sort of delight which the earth might feel if it could muse over the fine wild times that it had in its more volcanic youth.

This is a pretty fancy too. And no doubt a modern playgoer may feel that he is a person of old and eventful lineage; he is the latest term, for the moment, in an immensely long series; at every step of it something relatively primitive has been suppressed and something relatively subtle has come in. So he may well believe, on the authority of the wise, that the tissues of his brain are charged with remote ancestral memories and visited by the ghosts of many ancient

experiences and sensibilities. He finds it easy enough to suppose that when he is moved by the tragic conflict between Shakespeare's Richard II. and Bolingbroke, the setting of the one star and the rising of the other, there is some element in him which still feels a residual thrill from the time when only the germ of our tragic drama yet existed—some rude dance or charade in which primitive man tried to express his sense of the conflict between summer and winter or between the old year and the new year that comes to kill it. *Delights of Tragedy*

But due respect for the fruits of modern research does not call upon us to assume that our passions are weaker than those of the Neanderthal Man, or that all that is left, in that line, for the grown-up mind of the race is a vein of sentimental dreaming, like Justice Shallow's, about the famous doings of its ungovernable youth. Try to fix and define, to yourself, your own state of feeling at times when a great tragedy is working on you most strongly. I think you will feel pretty sure that if your sensations throw any bright light on the path of human evolution they throw most of it forward, along the road that we still have to travel. They are head lamps, not tail ones.

But now to draw off, for the moment, from this line of approach, and try to come at the heart of the matter from a new side.

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When you meet, in the flesh, a writer whose work has seemed to you to have tragic force you are apt to feel that, face to face and talking with him, you are, in essentials, further removed from him than you were

when you had only read his books. You may feel that now you are being held off at arm's length, when you remember the man's other self, the frank, authentic self which you saw coming out in his work. Compared with that self-revealer, the man before you seems like a creature withdrawn into a shell. Between you and him there has now risen the estranging film of defensive reticence which separates nearly all of us from our friends.

Or, possibly, somebody, whom you have known for a long time, writes a tragic book of some power; and, as you read it, you say to yourself, "How little I have known him, all this while!" Now that the mood of his tragedy possesses you, you feel that you know far more about what goes on in the guarded parts of his mind, when he is most deeply moved, than you ever did before.

It is not easy to own the truth of this, freely and fully. One's everyday habits of thought impede that. In the commonest sense of the word, a person whom you never saw before is a stranger. And a stranger, as people say, is a stranger. Besides, one's knowledge of people whom one has met every day is so circumstantial—one knows so exactly all the trivial things about them; it seems sound to assume that if anyone's mind and heart are known to us, it must be theirs. But examine and cross-examine your sensations with a resolutely open mind; assume nothing; take nothing for granted; then it may come to you not as a paradox but as a plain statement of fact that, in looking long and yieldingly at Turner's "Building of Carthage" you are being used as a confidant; confession is being made to you of a quality of melancholy more intimately self-revealing, perhaps, than

any avowal made to you by a living friend. And, again, in the tragic novels of Thomas Hardy a clean breast is made of certain intensities of personal emotion so intimate that perhaps they could never be faithfully avowed except by an artist through his art. *Delights of Tragedy*

Intimacy, an avowal, a confidant—may not the words throw some first faint rays of light on our difficulty? Almost all intellectual or emotional intimacy excites and delights us; the rising scale of satisfaction that a playgoer draws from the onward march of a fine tragedy may correspond with his gradual admission to an exceptional measure of intimacy with the deeply moved mind of the dramatist.

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The mind to which that drilling access is gained will not be deeply moved only. It will be also uncommon. In presence of any piece of fine tragic art we are likely to feel that it shows, at least, an unusual capacity for strong emotion in the artist. He must have had the power and the will to achieve feelings more poignant than ours; he must have carried certain feelings on much further than the common run of us can do it towards whatever the ultimate issue of the most intense feeling may be. Before the "Dante's Dream" of Rossetti you may well feel that the painter, while at work, was more profoundly moved than most of us could be, without his help, by the thought of a great love that never found its mortal close. When we are stirred by the music of some antique chant, such as the "Dies Irae", there may be set free, as chemists say, an extremely powerful emotion with which some mediaeval artist was

once charged. When Horace said to the Roman dramatist, "Grieve, yourself, first, if you want me to weep at your play", I fancy he cannot have meant that the tragic author ought to grieve over the fall of his hero, as any of us might grieve over a friend or son of his own; rather that he should be searched and shaken by some genuine personal vision of such a calamity, a vision so passionately poignant that any emotion which he hopes to arouse in an audience will fall well within the measure of his own.

To supply a whole town with water from a well, the water must first be pumped up to the top of a tower higher than any of the domestic cisterns which it is to fill. I think of a tragic writer's mind as a tower like that, and I think of his "subject", the facts from which he starts, the murder of Caesar or of Duncan, as so much water at the bottom of a well, not available for human use until the tower has enriched it with the property of elevation. The historical facts behind the play of *Macbeth* are mere matter for criminal courts. To turn them to tragedy, exaltation must be imposed upon them, and this can only be done by one who himself is capable of a towering height of sane emotion. Shakespeare did not derive from the pre-existing novel the energy of emotion which animates with its dark blaze the last act of *Othello*. He derived it—you can only say he derived it from being Shakespeare. It came of the full exertion of an enormous personal power of being moved, of feeling tragically. The creation of any fine tragedy is an outburst of one species of tremendous vital energy; its author has, in a certain respect and for a certain time, lived with a rare and glowing intensity. And, to all of us, any contact with abound-

ing life and energy is rousing and exciting. It is, if not delight itself, at least the raw material of delight. *Delights of Tragedy*

Here, then, already, are two possible sources of pleasure in tragedy; first, the thrill of an emotional confidence or intimacy of any kind; and, secondly, the thrill of contact with vital power in full flood.

## 6

But there may yet be other savours to enjoy. Every great tragedy must, in a certain limited sense, be a thing intensely artificial. Every speech in it has to be cunningly calculated. Its author has to cope, not only with technical difficulties that attend every kind of imaginative writing, but also with the special set of difficulties that beset writers for the theatre. When Gloucester, at the beginning of *Richard the Third*, bursts into the big opening speech, "Now is the winter of our discontent Made glorious summer", and so on, almost every line is, from one point of view, a good yard of ground won by Shakespeare in conflict with a dramatist's first technical difficulty—that of getting his audience to see quickly what the play is to be about and how everything stands at the start. When Macbeth, just after the murder of Duncan, delivers the famous speech about sleep, one can see, besides many other things, Shakespeare the wary theatrical craftsman dealing with the technical difficulty of playing out time until the short interval has elapsed which might naturally pass before the next occasional sound in the sleeping castle. It is, of course, the same with comedy. In the "seven ages" speech in *As You Like It* you see Shakespeare meeting

the technical difficulty that Orlando has just gone off to fetch Adam, and that something or other must be done to give him time to reach Adam and come back; you see Shakespeare timing the action, watch in hand, as it were, and possibly giving man an extra age or two, lest Orlando and Adam should seem to come incredibly soon.

No doubt it has often been said that in presence of a work of art the lay spectator need not, or even should not, be aware of the means taken by the artist to produce his effect. And there is the shallow proverb about art's being the concealment of art. If this were wholly true, then art might be ranked with conjuring, in which it is indispensable to the highest success that the public should not see how the rabbit got into the top-hat. But a picture is none the better for making us think it is not a picture at all, but a live man looking through a gilt frame, or a real landscape seen through a window. That is hanky-panky, not art; and surely it is equally true that the stage, though it gives you illusions, should not give you delusions. We should always be conscious, at least in some one or other of the chambers of our mind, of the artist behind the play, selecting, emphasising, subduing, winnowing, refining. If you carry far enough the interrogation of your own sensations in the theatre, I think you will come to feel sure that some little fraction, at least, of your enjoyment of tragedy consists in the sort of sympathetic delight that all of us feel when we see any severe technical task triumphantly accomplished and any craftsman's victory over the intractableness of his material handsomely won by the refinements of his ingenuity and precaution.

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And now to look back along the way we have come and to pick up anything helpful that we have left lying about. First came the notion that a fine tragedy can give us the happy thrill of more or less conscious admission to an unusual measure of emotional confidence. Then that it might give us the joyous excitement of contact with an abounding and rousing vitality. Then that it offers us the delight of witnessing the achievement of a remarkable intellectual feat of contrivance, accommodation and balance.

But to leave it at this would not do. For the stir of spirit which we feel at the climax of a fine tragedy is much more than the sum of these three separate enjoyments simply added together. Rather is it their product when they are all, in a sense, multiplied by one another. The delight of a spiritual intimacy is heightened, beyond anything expressible in terms of simple addition, when the confidence is that of a spirit of rare force and fire brooding over the innermost things of experience. And, again, the delight of receiving this communicated emotion is not offered to us merely side by side with the intellectual pleasure of seeing a choice craftsman fashion his work out into handsomeness. For in any great piece of work there is no mere juxtaposition, or superimposition, of intellect and emotion. What occurs is more like one of those chemical unions of elements from which a new substance arises, with properties wholly transcending any that are found in its separate components or in their merely mechanical union.

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Consider what it is that goes on in an artist at work. Some idea, or mood, or scene, or character piques him. He sets to work to express this interest of his in his own technical way, through paint or words or musical notes or whatever his medium may be. This technical effort, perhaps begun almost coldly, soon absorbs and then excites him; the heat of it reacts on the prior interest which it has tried to express, makes it a much warmer, deeper interest or emotion, raises it into a passion of curiosity and desire to feel the emotion out to its very end, to carry it on till it has become all that it has it in it to be. Then the enhanced emotion reacts, in turn, on the artist's technical power, strings it up to go beyond itself, to reach out beyond what had ever before seemed possible to it; and again that momentarily reinforced technical power spurs on the emotional imagination to attempt unhoped-for miracles of insight. In the making of any fine tragedy we may discern this interaction between emotion and intellect, between vision and technique; not a mere co-operation of distinct forces, but an extremely powerful reciprocal action, each in turn firing the other and fired by it, and each, at every step in this ascending scale of collaboration, losing itself in the other more and more, so that it becomes harder and harder to say which is which, until in the finished work something has come into existence in which you cannot, for the life of you, say what is matter and what is form, so far has it passed beyond that common state of mediocre art in which a naked and uncomfortable theme seems to be trying awk-

wardly to put on a misfitting overcoat of paint or of language.



Assume that this is what takes place in the mind that fashions a great tragic drama. Then what takes place in our minds when we see it is likely to be something not, of course, identical with this, but still related to this and responsive to it. Corresponding to the dramatist's growing intensity of emotion there is the momentary rise in us of that curious access of tenderness which may bring tears to the eyes and yet is so painless, and even so subtly delicious, that most of those who have felt it wish to feel it over and over again. And, to correspond to the dramatist's state of intellectual exaltation, his more than common command of his craft's means of expression, there is evoked in the spectator a more than normal power of taking things in. At the climax of a tragedy it seems as if the average man or woman could understand almost anything—even things which may again become incomprehensible to them next day when they try to understand how they understood them. With most of us who are playgoers it is a common experience to find every line of a great tragedy charged with expression when we see it played and have completely surrendered ourselves to its power, whereas in our ordinary, unmoved state of mind we have not been able to make head or tail of many of its speeches. The most enigmatic exclamations of persons tragically involved, Cleopatra's cry, "The soldier's pole is fallen", or Macbeth's, "She should have died hereafter", cease to perplex us. What else, we feel, should they say?

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We saw how, in the dramatist engrossed in his creative job, the power to feel more than most of us can, and the power to think more than most of us can, egg each other on to reach out beyond themselves to do impossibilities—impossibilities at any other time and in any other state of the man's faculties. And so, in some measure, is it with the stirred playgoer too. In him, too, the delight of an expanded emotional capacity and the delight of a strengthened mental eyesight act and react upon each other, giving and taking value and power. At the climax of the finest tragedies their matter and their form, that which the dramatist feels and that which he thinks out, attain virtual identity in a kind of impassioned perfection. And in the fit spectator, also, the old consciousness of feeling and thought, as things distinct and often conflicting, may vanish clean away. He may be lifted on to a plane on which, for a little time, the separate energies of heart and mind attain at the same time their own utmost growth and also a harmony verging on absolute unity. And in that state of himself he may gain, for some fugitive moments, a glimpse of life as it might look to an eye and mind more penetrating than mankind, in the mass, has yet achieved.

## 10

A high mountain with its upper half always hidden under ice and snow and often obscured by clouds is one of the most movingly beautiful of things; it is, as a whole, one of the things most challenging to bodily effort for the sheer joy of effort, and

one of the things that reward effort with the most enchanting consciousness of the reach of your bodily powers and of the marvel of possessing with your senses the physical world.

And yet, if you looked only at this or that point on the mountain's surface, you might see only a little crag, down which a man might easily fall and break his neck, or a little crevasse waiting to trap anyone who walks carelessly over it. And, if you thought of that point alone, you might naturally say: "This crevasse is a very bad business", or "That crag is a lamentable affair. Where does the delight come in?"

Great tragedy presents, you might say, that crag or crevasse, in all its own lethal horror, and yet as a part of a whole which is rousingly noble and grand. When untransfigured by tragic genius, the fatal involvement of some Antony of real life is just a bad business, no more; an Antony is a bad business, and when a Macbeth or any other good fellow goes to the bad it is a lamentable affair—merely that. But in fine tragedies such falls become, somehow, minute and isolated hazards to be found on the huge surface of life as their author imaged it to himself—and imaged it with a rapture of enjoyment, a kind of disinterested delight in finding everything just what it was, good or bad.

People sometimes shrink from assenting to this. They feel it almost immoral to say that Shakespeare delighted in a greedy murderer or a cunning slanderer. But read *Macbeth* and *Othello* with an open mind and, surely, you can have no doubt. Shakespeare revels in grasping the notion of Macbeth and of Iago. Not, of course, that in real life he would prefer them to straight-living persons, nor that in

real life he is nearer to them or more like them. It is simply that, just as a child's hands love to touch wool because it is soft and warm, and also iron because it is hard and cold, so his mind loves to frame the idea of goodness because it is good and of baseness because it is base. Without any prejudice to moral judgement there is possible a sort of gusto for all the contents of life alike—for pain and loss as well as virtues and victories—simply because each has its own delicious differentness for the apprehending mind.

"What a piece of work is a man!"—that speech of Hamlet's is the very expression of this gusto, even in the midst of discouragement and doubt. You find it again in Pope's lines about man as

> A being darkly wise, and rudely great;
>
> . . . . .
>
> Created half to rise, and half to fall;
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled,
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

That is the temper of genius. It seems to land upon the chequered soil of human nature and experience as though on an unexplored island of boundless strangeness, variety and fascination, as exciting in its swamps and its wild beasts as in its springs and fruit; all join in making it one immense adventure for the spirit.

Here, too, the spectator's sensations are likely to have some measure of correspondence to the quality of the artist's creative ardour. If we can bring ourselves to own it, our feeling at the early deaths and baffled loves of tragedy is really one of exultation. You may call it sombre, but exultation it is; first, at that opened spectacle of human existence as a more

tremendous enterprise than we knew, more terrible, but also more magnificent and a more thrilling challenge than ever to the spirit that is ready to meet anything; and also at our own strangely heightened power of being moved without being numbed and of seeing, as it seems, right into life's glowing heart with a clearness and calm unattainable in almost any other mood.

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II

All that is enjoyment; in fact it comes pretty close, in its nature, to what has been held supreme and superhuman enjoyment. The kind of released mental insight which tragedy gives us at least for a few moments is, in a permanent form, the main delight which the chief of Greek thinkers attributed to God; one of the most profound of modern English philosophers, the late R. L. Nettleship, said: "I sometimes think one might conceive of God as a being who might experience what we call the intensest pain and pleasure without being 'affected' by it"—meaning by "affected", disabled or incapacitated, or reduced to incoherence or apathy, as we commonly are by personal griefs.

Is it not, then, conceivable that, at the picked moments of exaltation and vision which great tragedy brings, we may be gaining a foretaste of the use of finer faculties with which the continued process of evolution may yet endow the race? We may not be able fully to analyse our own sensations at such moments; but it seems credible that the almost mystical rapture which they bring may be, although we do not know it, the joy of reaching forward through time and anticipating mankind's future

spiritual understanding. The men of science tell us our eye has grown to be what it is from being merely a spot of ordinary skin a little more sensitive than the rest. Is it, then, difficult to believe that our present capacity for feeling and thinking is, compared with what it may come to, like an eye that has as yet achieved only half of that growth?

At present the whole relation between delight and beauty on one side and tragic poignancy on the other seems an obscure region infested by doubts and only fitfully lit by conjectures and seeming paradoxes. Keats tells us that

> Ay, in the very temple of delight
> Veiled melancholy has her sovran shrine.

Synge speaks of "the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world". Everyone has felt that there is a vague but sharp poignancy blended with his own delight in such things as tranquil summer evenings and fine dawns. When a perfect tragedy possesses your mind you seem for a moment to have your hand near some clue to all that region of enigma. You cannot keep your hold on the clue but, for those moments verging on trance, everything has run almost clear in your mind; when the experience is over, you feel sure that what you have had was vision and not delusion; may you not hope that you have craned forward and caught a momentary glimpse of life as a mind more fully grown might see life always?

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How positive one becomes! A few pages back I was expressing a proper diffidence about any con-

clusions in view, and here I am, almost shouting in favour of one. It is not a calculated piece of ill faith; it is only a common effect of the strong waters of literary composition. A few minutes ago I was saying how a technical effort may engender in a tragic dramatist a wonderful heat and quickness of sympathy, and in a less distinguished craftsman it certainly may bring on a fine turn of cocksureness. Not only that which goeth in at the mouth but that which cometh out of the mouth may intoxicate. *Delights of Tragedy*

But remember; this, like other artificial heats, subsides rapidly. Already doubts invade me. At any moment some better-gifted critic may bring out some reason for our enjoyment of tragedy, more valid than any that I have been able to think of. Mine is merely the unsystematic attempt of one playgoer to make out why his mind has been in such a stir whenever a tragedy of the first rank has risen to its climax in his sight.

# *The Last Question of All*

# THE LAST QUESTION OF ALL

## I

All lines of thought about literature lead to one ultimate question. It lies at the end of more roads than Rome ever did. Why are we moved so strongly and so strangely as we are by certain simple groupings of a few ordinary words?

Bacon says that the nature of things is best seen in the smallest possible quantities of them. Take, then, some unit or atom of beautiful writing—a line of verse or a sentence of prose that has stirred you uncommonly. It may be Falstaff's "We have heard the chimes at midnight"; or

> the tide of pomp
> That beats upon the high shore of this world.

Or

> visited all night by troops of stars,

in Coleridge's *Hymn before Sunrise*. How comes it that these special sequences of quite common words can take hold of you with a high hand, filling your mind and thrilling it with a poignant ecstasy, a delicious disquiet, akin to the restlessness and the raptures of lovers? When I was an idle boy going to school and discovered the lines, out of Scott,

> Yet the lark's shrill fife may come
> At the day-break from the fallow,
> And the bittern sound his drum,
> Booming from the sedgy shallow,

they made me so drunk with delight that I had to walk up and down empty compartments of trains, saying them over and over again, as incapable as a bluebottle either of sitting quiet or ceasing to hum. The adult Stevenson would seem to have been bitten by much the same gadfly when first he read certain verses of Meredith's "Love in the Valley":

> Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping
> Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.

He told Mr. Yeats how he went about whooping the heavenly stuff to the Dryads of the Riviera, "waking with it all the echoes of the hills about Hyères". Everybody must know the sensation. But how to account for it?

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Of course you can easily go a small part of the way towards a full explanation. In the Meredith lines, for example, certain contributory lures and graces are obvious—the engaging "Sing a song o' sixpence" melody, the play that is made with a few picked consonants, winged and liquidly gliding, and the winning way the second line is retarded at its close by the three stressed monosyllables, like a well-mannered horse pulled up by a well-mannered rider. The Scott passage, too, has its taking devices of craftsmanship. There is the deftly managed consonantal chord of BDF pervading it to its advantage. There is the drum-like beat of its main vowels and the reedy hiss of the successive sibilants to help evoke the picture in the two last lines.

Such devices are not to be sniffed at. They help. They are like jewels and lace skilfully worn by a

beautiful woman. But these are not the intrinsic and ultimate beauty of their wearer. The Venus of Melos had none; and some of the most lovely sentences ever written are almost as bare of any applied ornament, anything we can detach and define. The critical analyst has to throw up his hands, almost at once, when he tries to precipitate with his acids the charm of

> Brightness falls from the air;
> Queens have died young and fair;
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye,

or of

> She walks in beauty, like the night
> Of cloudless climes and starry skies.

The context, of course, counts for something: every gem is the better for a fine setting. But no gem of the first water is made by its setting. These small splinters of perfection in the art of letters would still bewitch us if they had no context at all. As if to prove as much, Shakespeare struck off one of them—

> Childe Roland to the dark tower came—

and left it contextless, to haunt the minds of poets like one of the isolated granules of beauty surviving from the Greek anthology. For it, too, has the essential gem-like quality—a kind of dazzling unreason, as it may seem at first sight—a power of taking you captive without giving you any materials for a presentable explanation of your surrender.

## 3

If we cannot say why we capitulate thus, we may at least try to fix and describe the sensations that visit us while the charm is at work.

For one thing, we are deeply excited. We are shaken or lifted out of our ordinary state of consciousness. Many of our faculties are, for the moment, enhanced. We feel keener perceptions coming into action within us. We are given the use of more than our normal stock of penetrative sympathy: we feel that we can enter into people's feelings and understand the quality of their lives better than ever before.

Another effect of the drug is that, while it is acting strongly, the whole adventure of mankind upon the earth gains, in our sight, a new momentousness, precariousness and beauty. The new and higher scale of power in ourselves seems to be challenged by an equal increase in the size of the objects on which it is exercised. Living becomes a grander affair than we had ever thought.

A third effect on the mind is a powerful sense—authentic or illusory—of being in the presence of extraordinary possibilities. You feel as if new doors of understanding and delight were beginning to open around you. Some sort of mysterious liberation or empowerment seems to be approaching. You are assured, in an unaccountable way, that wonderful enlightenments, still unreceived, are on their way to you, like new stars that are nearing the point in space at which they will come within range of our sight.

These sensations may not be defined or measured as closely as doctors measure a patient's temperature, his pulse and his blood pressure. And yet they are worth describing, if only because you will find that you are also describing something else by the way. The nearer you get to saying just what you feel, when under the spell of great writing, the nearer are

you, too, to defining the state of mind and heart in which great things are written.

4

That state is not normal. It is not the state of each particular writer "at par". To do great things he has to be far above himself, however high his normal level of thought and feeling may be. Not of Oliver Goldsmith alone among writers might it be said that he "wrote like an angel and talked like poor Poll". Nor need we suppose that Goldsmith himself did any injustice to the normal level of his mind when he failed to shine at the club in conversation with Reynolds and Burke. More probably the angelic music and wit of his best prose came to the birth when he was worked up to an extraordinary state of mental fertility and felicity. More often than not the great writer or other great artist, when seen and heard in the flesh, is a disappointing figure to innocent persons who seek his acquaintance under the old illusion that the living, breathing man must be greater than his work. Seek not to "see Shelley plain". He may be plain indeed. Tennyson could be a boor, and the inexpressive grunts of Turner are notorious.

And yet this state of pregnant excitement is not a mystery wholly concealed from ordinary people or absolutely excluded from their experience. Almost everyone must at some time or other have found how it feels to be utterly absorbed in the writing of a private letter—how you lose count of time and have no sense of disagreeable effort; how words of a strange rightness come easily into your head and apt quotations drift into your reach; how some scene that you

describe becomes more and more amusing to yourself, in recollection, while you describe it; and how at the end you are rather tired and rather happy, and read the thing through and say to yourself that you would never have thought you could do it so well.

That common experience is not different in kind, but only in the degree of its intensity, from an onset of creative passion in a great imaginative artist. Where such an artist differs most widely from the common run of men and women is in his power of inducing that exceptional condition in himself and of working it up to a pitch that for the rest of us is quite unattainable. For most of his time he may seem, and indeed he may be, quite a dull man, a humourless egoist or a trumpeting bore. He may cut no figure at all among the wits and sages of a country house or a bar parlour. But, with a pen in his hand to excite him, he can "have a devil" at will, or at least some of the many times he wills it. In a way he is like a car with a quite commonplace basic speed, but a remarkable power of acceleration. And in a way he is like those gifted fighting men in whom the manual exercise of combat seems to light a wonderful fire in the blood. To them battle brings ecstasy. They are ravished above pain and fear; and in that temporary trance of exemption from common checks upon fury, and of immunity from the common maladies of the will, they can delightedly do and endure things preposterous or impossible in the eyes of cool common sense.

5

It is seldom that a great artist has anything new to say about life. The things that touch or amuse him

are usually those by which the greatest number of ordinary people were touched and amused before him. The minds of Vergil and Sophocles, Shakespeare and Dante and Goethe seem in the main to have brooded over just those staple themes which elicit less memorable expressions of melancholy from Smith, Brown and Jones—lost youth and severed friends and disappointed love and the consignment of beauty to dust and the frustration of hopes that once seemed too powerful ever to fail. If a great tragic writer were to arise in England to-day, it is likely that his musings on the perishable splendour of man's fate and the irreparableness of action would take the form most widely prevalent already among the more sensitive portion of his countrymen—perhaps an afternoon sense of sad sunshine and overblown flowers, the outlived expectations of a melting empire on an earth that is rubbing its own features down and that moves always more and more slowly round a sun that is losing its heat. The theme would be commonplace. But when the great tragic writer had brooded upon it, then it would have gained the charm of a new and extraordinary intensity.

A great and available reserve of sheer intensity—intensity of perception and of emotion—it is in his possession of this that a great artist differs most deeply from his fellows. In no vague or rhetorical sense of the words, he sees and hears more intensely. Science tells us that what we call a sight or a sound is a product of two distinct forces. As waves break upon a sea coast, certain undulatory movements that throb through the air break upon delicate shores in a man's eyes or ears. From the beach, so to speak, word is sent thereupon by a nerve to a special bureau of the

brain; and, with this material in hand, the brain builds up for itself the song of a lark or the colour and form of a rose in a world that, apart from this act of the brain, is utterly silent and dark. So there is no one rose or lark perceived identically by us all. There are as many different roses or larks as there are different brains to make them. The flower or bird of the great artist's make, when his brain is working at its best, is made with an extraordinary concentration of care and delight. It is like a lover's handiwork, done for the beloved, not a journeyman's.

This intense constructiveness of vision goes beyond objects of physical sight. From the construction of single physical things, at the instance of the eye, or on the prompting of the ear, it can pass easily on to the vivid framing of their implications: in Blake's much-quoted words it can see the world in a grain of sand, and Heaven in a wild flower. It can go further and build up, always with a passionate relish for what it is producing, a kind of semi-sensuous image of something abstract and vague—the *lacrimae rerum* of Vergil, life's falling tears, or the Wordsworthian sense of the world's loss of transfiguration as we grow up. But, however sombre the theme, it brings to the artist no grief in the usual sense of the word. For grief disables, but this kind of vision empowers. It has been said that God is a person who feels all the pain there is in the world without being disabled by it at all. And thus much of divineness there is in a great artist. When the excitement of writing *Macbeth* had worked Shakespeare up to the full height and heat of his powers, he saw the frustrating aspect of most people's lives with such intensity of clearness that, if he had not been an artist at work, he might

well have thrown everything up and sat down to despair. But the heat of artistic emotion is always convertible into force of the constructive order. So the climax of intensity in this tragic vision brought no incoherent cry of pity or prostration, but the extreme opposite, the passionately perfected design of one of the most famous of the writer's "purple patches":



> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

## 6

To this supernormal level of impassioned constructiveness a writer, or any other artist, mounts by an ascending scale of interaction between the technical exercise of his craft—the act of word-assorting and writing, of laying on paint or of modelling clay —and the imaginative effort of penetrating to the essence, the inmost and uttermost significance of the "subject" before him. You may see a painter start a portrait almost apathetically. He will handle his paint in a commonplace way. He will seem to see no more than you or I can see at a glance in the personality of his sitter. But soon the feel of the paint on the canvas begins to enliven his mind; and the mind thus quickened conceives a livelier curiosity about the creature before him. And then the mind that is

piqued with this curiosity transmits in turn a share of its new animation to the working hand, firing it to do feats of swift sureness, summary selection and eloquent brilliancy beyond its ordinary powers. And so this process of mutual stimulation continues till both the faculties engaged in it are forced up far above their natural human commonness. They rise to a point at which the artist is sometimes said, in the old phrase, to be "inspired".

The phrase may be uncritical. And yet it has a measure of aptness. It does at least convey that a painter or a writer has attained a kind of self-attesting note of authority for which we cannot easily account. His lips may not be touched, but he speaks as if they were. And we listen as if they were too. Out of some experience not given to ourselves, and not to be easily explained to us, he has emerged with an utterance which we cannot prove to be authentic but which still imposes itself irresistibly upon our belief and our admiration. Somehow it carries about it an indefinable certificate that it is no skimble-skamble stuff, with nothing behind its façade. There shine through it still the intensity of vision and the immense sincerity of the emotion in which it had its origin.

Think how often you have seen some slippery politician put his hand upon his heart and vow that it is only "for the cause" that he has executed this little manœuvre or that. Nobody minds him. And yet when Othello says, "It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause", you do not merely believe it. You probably feel that never till now have you fully known how appallingly sincere a man may be in trying to remain judicial under a tempest of pain. It is no rare experience, again, to hear someone say that he is dying,

and to know that it is true. In such a case you are probably touched by the words, but unless the dying man be a dear friend you will scarcely feel any such surge of emotion as shakes you when Antony says, "I am dying, Egypt, dying". For here you have not merely truth, but truth raised to higher powers of itself; not the simple overshadowing of life by death, but the immensity of tragic import that this obscuration may have for a mind enormously more susceptible to tragic impressions than your own. 

## 7

There still remains that ultimate question. In virtue of what do these intrinsically plain arrangements of quite common words carry the germs of a rare and noble fever of the soul from a person long dead to persons living in another age and perhaps at the other end of the world? Is it that, even when masked in print, the written word retains the power of the spoken voice to give a subtle guarantee of its own authenticity, if authentic it be? So that in print, as well as in speech, the same words may stir us deeply in one case and leave us quite cold in another? Does some intimation reach us that one man has written them with authority, and another only as the scribes? If so, is the intimation "internal", as we say of literary evidence? Can it be traced in some more elusive quality in the actual words than any that literary criticism has yet marked down. In that passage quoted already—

> Brightness falls from the air;
> Queens have died young and fair;
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye—

is there some delicately expressive quality of rhythm which carries with it the same overpowering effect of momentousness that a spoken assurance sometimes derives, in part, from the modulation of the living voice? Or can criticism only say that by some means which are out of its ken these heavenly lines do somehow convey a state of passionately poignant exaltation from the writer's mind to the fit reader's—and leave us to wonder whether the apparently countless sets of possibly communicative "waves", suspected but not yet listed, that are said to ripple endlessly about the world, may include a set that enables the passionate stir of one mind to impinge directly on some specially sensitised tissue in other brains, with the aid of no more apparatus than certain verbal memoranda playing a quite subsidiary part in the business?

"What know I?"—from this cascade of tough questions I take refuge, for my own part, in the safe old question of Montaigne.

THE END